Softlab

Company: Rover GroupCustomer: SoftlabSubmitted by: Portfolio CommunicationsDate: September 1999Rover Group, Britain's largest motor manufacturer and third largest exporter, employs over 39, 000 people in the UK and internationally.

On 26 March 1999, Softlab Ltd and Rover Group completed the latest phase of the Rover Group Enterprise Data Warehouse. This marks the culmination of Rover's strategic plan to bring consistent up-to-date information on its core business to all areas of the company, with complementary benefits of speed, efficiency and accuracy. The data warehouse will significantly aid Rover Group in its ongoing quest to improve standards of vehicle quality and customer service. Begun in 1989, the initial project was, from the outset, a leading-edge development ahead of its time. It was developed to bring together all the disparate IT systems holding the company's information. The innovative project has led the way for subsequent data warehouse installations, a resource that only now, in the late 1990s, is beginning to be widely recognised for its commercial potential.

The Rover Group Enterprise Data Warehouse is continuing throughout 1999 with the current team of Softlab developers and analysts increasing significantly in size.

Beginnings: disparate IT systems, conflicting information

The project began towards the end of the 1980s when Rover Group ran its business from a number of disparate operational systems. However, this led to each one generating its own independent reports that sometimes conflicted or were out-of-date. The degree of complexity meant that a radical

overhaul was required to enable accurate reporting from the disparate systems and to store the data in a way that allowed easy retrieval and manipulation. Rover Group had (and still has) three computer systems that monitored and managed the vehicle-build process (one for each manufacturing site). In addition, it had two computer systems that managed the financial cost of the vehicles (one for Land Rover and one for Rover Cars) and another system managing the movement of vehicles between the manufacturing plants, dealers and customers.

The computer systems that processed vehicles from order to delivery were independent and had different archiving criteria. One single consolidated view across the systems was impossible as the total volume of information required was enormous and the technical architectures were different. Although databases, such as those produced by Oracle, were available, Gartner Group analysts told Rover staff that the sheer complexity and volume of its data would require an NCR Teradata machine capable of storing and retrieving huge quantities of information.

A data warehousing solution ahead of its time

In 1989, ISTEL, predecessor to the current Softlab organisation, signed a £5 million contract with Rover Group for five years, to provide the car manufacturer with a centralised Teradata database, using an NCR platform. The project was at the leading edge of technology for its time.

Dave Sangwine, Softlab's data warehousing project manager says: " Data warehousing is a concept of the late 1980's and companies are, even now, only just beginning to realise its value. When we began developing this with

Rover Group, it was a new idea and the first project of its kind we had done."

Between 1989 and 1994, the data warehousing undertaken by the Softlab company was commissioned and paid for by individual departments within Rover Group on an ad-hoc basis. Although this work standardised the decision support reporting for various systems and brought significant business benefits to the users of those systems, they were not designed as one integrated central source of information (because they were not centrally funded). The data, therefore, could not be shared by all departments and did not provide the required ' company-wide' access to information. To address this, in 1995 (based on the success of the previous five year's work), Rover Group renewed the Softlab data warehousing contract for a further four years.

The contract renewal included the joint Rover Group and Softlab goal to develop and to deliver the Rover Group Enterprise Data Warehouse to the entire Rover Group management. This was a key strategic plan to bring up-to-date information on the company's core business to all areas of the organisation, with the attached benefits of speed, efficiency and accuracy. The data is made available to users through their PCs, using existing IT infrastructure. 1999 revenue forecasts for this project are 10 per cent higher than the combined revenue earned in 1997 and 1998. This demonstrates the success Softlab and Rover Group have had in their data warehouse project. To facilitate programming and to ensure a fast turnaround of projects, Softlab uses the ETI*Extract tool suite (from Evolutionary Technologies Inc.

) This toolset enables Softlab developers to reduce the development time required during the traditional data ' unload/reload' phase. Although vital,

this task was inherently time-consuming, repetitive and dull to develop, until ETI*Extract was utilised. The solution allows the developers to deliver data across platforms in about a tenth of the time it would have taken using traditional programming techniques. Dave Sangwine is a proponent of this method: " Using ETI has given Softlab a competitive edge in terms of time, cost and productivity, in the area of data acquisition."

Added value: improving supplier performance

" The ' vision' of data warehousing," says Dave Sangwine, " is to help the user find trends (or simply unknown facts) in a company's information." This proved to be the case in the most recent phase of the warehouse.

Rover Group sub-contracts the movement of its vehicles to a series of UK carrier companies, all of whom are given performance-related objectives. When the movement data was displayed to the end users using a graphical interface (developed in Holos), the users recognised anomalies in their data that enabled them to renegotiate some of those contracts. This benefited Rover Group and (more importantly), the customers. The project has been so successful in assisting there-engineering of the vehicle delivery part of the business in the UK that the project is being extended to include the export business. Dave Sangwine also states: " For Rover Group, trend analysis has improved the efficiency of the carrier companies. It could also be used to target markets more effectively, using historical information on vehicles to improve future performance.

In increasingly competitive markets, companies will need to begin using their existing data on products and customers much more effectively to maximise profits."

About the benefits gained

The warehouse is now a central source of all financial, build and delivery information for Rover Group. The data is accurate to close of business the previous day. About 95 per cent of this data is available to all staff. The remainder has a data classification of ' In Strict Confidence' and is only released to staff authorised to receive it. Any Rover Group associate can access information and customise their own reports to suit business needs.

This replaces the traditional way of working with standard report formats, pre-printed from a data centre. The warehouse provides the tools to create personalised information within the framework of a centrally managed data environment. Commenting on the Softlab data warehousing project, Vincent Hammersley, corporate communications manager for Rover Group, says: " Establishing a central data warehouse takes time and commitment but, if done properly, brings enormous business benefits in terms of control of information and, crucially, in terms of understanding that information. The Softlab solution has changed the way we manage and analyse our data, to increase our competitive edge across the business." The advantages of allowing employees direct access are already being enjoyed. The first phase of the warehouse was to acquire supplier names and addresses.

Rover Group's purchasing department in the UK received over a hundred telephone calls per day from associates requiring supplier information. Today

this has reduced by over 90 per cent as the information is now available to the employees through the Intranet. The data is accessible from Rover UK sites and BMW German sites. The Rover Group Enterprise Data Warehouse project continues throughout 1999 and is expected to continue into 2000. Softlab is now looking forward to the next challenge in its data warehousing development.

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