

Story: Sporting Goods Store Reporting

Joe's company, a small sporting goods company, conducts a high volume of business on a daily basis. Although business has been good, he suspects that the competition may have an advantage over him; however, this feeling cannot be translated into something worthwhile. Although the company has been using a relational database system to manage its business, getting the data into the system has proven to be much easier than getting data out of the system. Apparently, the system designers did not include all of the necessary tables that are needed to store the information that is necessary to run the business effectively. Unfortunately, none of the scripts that were used to create the system and run the necessary reports were documented anywhere. This lack of documentation will make it expensive to bring another information technology (IT) consultant in to assess the situation because of the amount of time it will take in researching the system capabilities.

As a business owner, Joe knows what goals and objectives he wants to accomplish with his business. However, he has found it difficult to make solid business decisions because the system never generates the reports that he wants or needs. He is frustrated because he invested a lot of money into the system about a year ago; yet he feels like he makes decisions more by gut feeling than by actual data that he pulls from the system. He knows that his competition has an internal IT staff that can run the reports that are needed, and because of this, Joe feels that his competition could eventually run him out of business. Joe does not even know what information the database is actually storing (or capable of storing), and he feels that he could make better use of his system if he had an idea as to what capabilities it possessed. Joe also voiced concern over his inability to fully understand the state of his business. He felt foolish when certain questions from shareholders came up about the financial state of the business, and he was not able to answer with any reasonable certainty or accuracy.

Moral of the Story

All of the scripts that are needed to create the database schema, select data from the system for reporting purposes, and that are used to support the front-end graphical user interface must be documented clearly and concisely. The technical part of the system needs to be documented using terminology that is common to database designers, and the end-user documentation must be written in such a way that the nontechnical employee can understand what the system is capable of. By having the end stakeholders make a list of reports that they want, a matching report name that the system provides can assist users in identifying which report matches their needs at a given time. This is especially beneficial when the mission and goals of the owner clearly state what reports will provide the information that is needed to make effective business decisions. A checklist that matches the mission and goals with the system capabilities can serve as a tool for ensuring that the system is doing its job.