Escape from Excel Hell

"Excel is like one of those side-road turns you take to avoid congestion on the main road - you speed up for a short while but then get even more stuck than you were before." - Anonymous

A condition sometimes referred to as Excel Hell causes a downward spiral of inefficiency and disruption related to the use of Excel for collaborative planning. Symptoms include broken formulas, consolidations that choke, multiple versions of the truth, mounting end-user frustration and decisions driven by bad data.

Over 90% of organizations today automate various business processes by working with data in an Excel format. By itself, this is fine. But when end-user requirements aren't being met by more sophisticated systems like ERP or CRM software and employees begin using Excel as a workaround solution, Excel Hell starts kicking in. Here is a sampling of what we've heard from business users of Excel:

- "Each spreadsheet in use - though important pieces of the puzzle - is not interconnected to the logic, algorithms and data of other spreadsheets. Ironically, we've convinced ourselves that it's working."

- "I hate to admit this: I rely heavily on 24 spreadsheets, but I only have a thorough understanding of the calculations and logic for a few of them."

- "I spend more time making sure the data in the spreadsheets is accurate than actually analyzing our business. Our budgeting, planning and forecasting suffers from being too dependent on Excel."

- "Part of my job is to develop and maintain complex Access databases and Excel spreadsheets which largely replicate the core functions they are intended to supplement."

None of these statements are positive for an organization. Each points to a workaround because data isn't effectively being managed by existing tools intended to do exactly that. This exposes an organization to a wide variety of risk and inefficiencies, most of which are kept "hidden" - not receiving the attention from management they deserve.

Solutions developed by data specialists can allow an organization to realize all the benefits of utilizing Excel and actively manage the weaknesses and risks this introduces. These solutions can be tailored to a specific business need and retain the good qualities of Excel, while simultaneously reducing the impact of the bad. The result is an architecture that delivers data from disparate sources into a consolidated, user-friendly, easy-to-maintain single point of access. Only people with deep knowledge of the way data is structured can effectively design this type of architecture. And it is how Excel Hell can be avoided.

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