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More Bang for the Buck

Budget constraints challenge BI teams to boost efficiency and productivity, according to a TDWI report. by Wayne Eckerson

Like a forest fire, a recession consumes the deadwood of business intelligence (BI) programs. But at the same time, it frees practitioners to dream up new ways to deliver solutions. The bright side of these challenging times is that BI teams are now equipped with new processes, organizations and technologies to deliver significant value.

With many budgets cut or flat, the drive to do more with less requires that BI professionals find new ways to deliver business results more efficiently. This emphasis has manifested itself largely in terms of tactics and strategies.

Tactics Versus Strategies

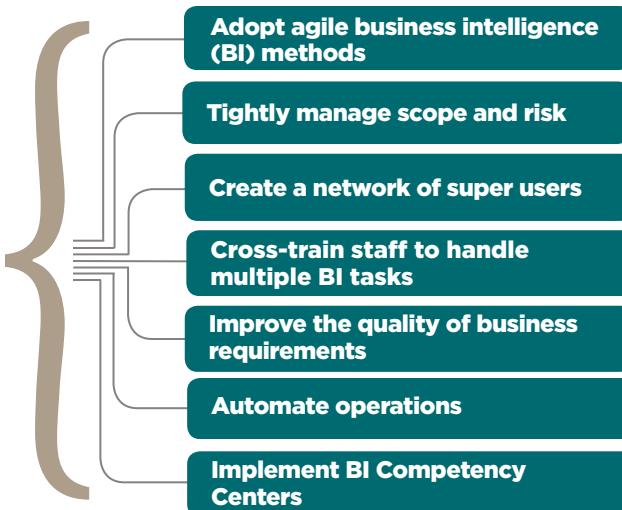
In the short term, BI teams have coped by using tactical maneuvers designed to cut costs without sacrificing quality or output. They have canceled low-priority projects and dismissed the contractors and consultants working on them.

Likewise, new product purchases and costly software upgrades are being put on hold. Some organizations have also successfully renegotiated software maintenance contracts while leaning on vendors to provide more assistance, such as building prototypes and delivering proofs of concept, free of charge. But these are only first steps.

When the budget ax falls, BI professionals must be proactive. Fortunately, they have the means and the know-how to **get the most out of their dollars.**

Longer-term, strategic initiatives must be put in place to improve operating efficiency and effectiveness. For instance, many enterprises are consolidating spreadsheets and data

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marts and eliminating redundant data, tools, infrastructure and staff. Likewise, BI teams are implementing self-service tools to not only enable users but also free themselves to focus on high-priority efforts.

Explore Technology

While tactics and strategies are crucial, new technologies are also important in this effort. Companies of all sizes are aggressively investigating them to improve BI operations. Many small and mid-sized businesses are turning to the latest offerings to get into the game, while veteran BI groups are replacing existing technology with next-generation capabilities.

Topping the list of priorities are dashboards; extract, transform and load (ETL) tools; and ad hoc and standard reporting tools. Simultaneously, many organizations are looking to implement scorecards and data quality, data mining and exploration tools for the first time.

Fortunately, many low-cost technology solutions are available. Open source, cloud BI, visual and discovery tools, plus data warehousing appliances and specialized analytical databases, all offer more functionality and performance for less. Small and mid-sized BI programs and their forward-thinking, larger counterparts are increasingly adopting these technologies.

Where to Start

When considering strategic or tactical cost-cutting efforts, it's important to first consider best practices. Here are four recommendations for BI groups:

- **Empower users.** Users clamor for tools that let them create their own reports. These tools can release you from report-writing duties so you can deliver additional value within budget and staffing constraints. However, self-service BI must be managed to avoid report chaos. To do this, train a network of super users to manage ad hoc reporting in each department.
- **Align with the business.** With limited resources, it's imperative to focus on high-value projects. Doing so requires you to work closely with the business. To add more rigor to business requirements processes and implement agile development techniques, you must involve business users every step of the way. This will enable you to reshuffle requirements after each increment. When your team reaches sufficient maturity, establish BI Competency Centers.
- **Work smart.** When resources are tight, work more efficiently and effectively. That means learning to make do with existing tools rather than purchasing new ones; postponing costly upgrades and using existing functionality; minimizing project

scope to reduce risk; avoiding overly complex, risky projects; and automating back-office operations to free up more time for development. Finally, cross-train staff to handle more tasks and use consultants judiciously to expedite projects.

➤ **Consolidate and negotiate.** Several strategies can help reduce costs in short order. One method is to negotiate new maintenance licenses with vendors and ask them to donate the software needed to build prototypes and conduct proofs of concept. Another is to consolidate data marts and BI tools to eliminate analytical silos and reduce overhead.

Strengthened by Fire

When the budget ax falls, BI professionals must be proactive. Fortunately, they have the means and the know-how to get the most out of their dollars. While such efforts start with immediate cost-saving tactics, they don't end there. Forward-looking, long-term strategies and cutting-edge technologies play key roles as well.

For those who can implement such long-term initiatives, leaner times can drive meaningful innovation, not merely belt-tightening. And while it's never painless to weather a firestorm, the result will be a stronger, healthier BI program in the long run. **T**

Wayne Eckerson is the director of TDWI Research. He is an industry analyst and educator covering data warehousing and business intelligence (BI) since 1995.

Editor's note: This article is derived from the TDWI Best Practices Report "BI on a Limited Budget: Strategies for Doing More with Less," by Wayne Eckerson. For more on this topic, see "Streamlining Strategy" on page 29.



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Download "BI on a Limited Budget: Strategies for Doing More with Less" on Teradata.com.