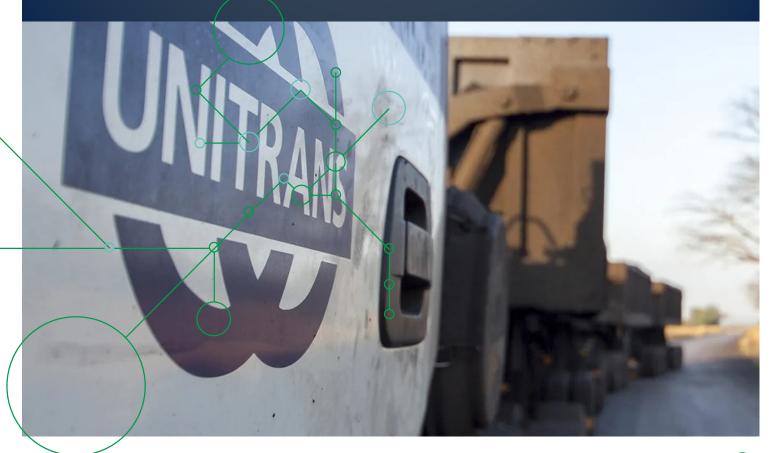ANALYTICS

Unitrans takes data the extra mile

African supply chain and logistics service provider uses Qlik to deliver insights by the truckload

B2IT

Qlik Q

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Christo Röder, Finance Innovation Manager, Unitrans Supply Chain Solutions

Adding value with analytics

Logistics in Africa can be a challenging business. The continent's infrastructure and terrain, combined with its sheer scale, means success needs to be achieved through agility, perseverance and resilience; all factors that are better achieved with access to real-time business intelligence (BI).

For Unitrans Supply Chain Solutions (USCS), the willingness to go the extra mile in terms of client service is another critical factor. USCS, the South African division of the broader Unitrans Group, is more than just a trucking company that moves goods from A to B. It handles warehousing, freight forwarding and clearing, vehicle loading and offloading, yard management, as well as a range of other related activities that other logistics operators may balk at.

"Wherever we can provide customers with efficiencies and synergies, we get involved," says Christo Röder, Finance Innovation Manager at Unitrans Supply Chain Solutions. "One of our customer contracts involves a farm where our teams are actually out catching chickens. There's almost nothing we're not willing to touch!"

Another area where Unitrans strives to make a difference, both to its own operations and those of its clients, is innovation.

"Our core business is service delivery, it's all to do with solutions," Röder adds. "When we sign up a customer, it's not just about performing an operation, it's about the value-add. And analytics adds that value."

Solution Overview

Customer Name
Unitrans

Industry
Transportation and Logistics

Geography
South Africa

Function
Finance, IT, Supply Chain Management

Business Value Driver
Customer Intelligence, Reimagined Processes

Challenges
- Deliver added value to clients
- Make better use of large, underutilized data resources
- Access data from multiple, sometimes challenging, sources

Solution
Unitrans deployed a suite of Qlik solutions, including QlikView®, Qlik NPrinting® and Qlik Sense®, to access, process and visualize data across Africa.

Results
- Accelerated and more accurate reporting gives Unitrans greater control over operations
- Improved processes free up staff time and enable more effective decisions
- Customer-facing dashboards provide improved visibility and planning processes

A totally different animal

When Röder joined Unitrans in 2014, he knew what the basic scope of his main directive would be; its scale, however, was less obvious. He had rolled out business information systems in his previous roles at manufacturing businesses and already had a solid working relationship with Johannesburg-based BI consultancy Business 2 IT (B2IT). He was ready to take the next step.

"Rolling out any BI tool in a manufacturing environment is simple; it's usually just one factory with everyone using the same system," he notes. "When I joined Unitrans, it was a totally different animal. Each entity, each division, each customer has a different system. And some of them beyond South African borders do not always have internet connectivity; they may have 3G for some of the time at best."

Röder also quickly realized that Unitrans was sitting on "heaps of data" that was largely underutilized, both in a customer-facing context and internally. Slow processes also meant that whatever data was being used was not at its most effective.

"It could take us two weeks just to prepare basic data," he says. "In this industry, data that's two weeks old can be essentially useless for management teams looking to make informed decisions. That's where Qlik came in."

Spreading like wildfire

Röder and B2IT in a short space of time established which platform would be the best fit for Unitrans. A combination of QlikView and NPrinting, later supplemented by Qlik Sense, gave the business a plug-and-play solution that met its unique combination of demands and reduced the need to move large volumes of data between locations.

"Qlik is so flexible, it can talk to different sources that don't have to be live all the time," explains Röder. "For example, one of our contracts just has a single PC running out of a container. Whenever the team is online they can upload basic CSV files, and Qlik takes care of the rest."

Such was its simplicity, securing funding and achieving the essential buy-in from stakeholders across the business was significantly more straightforward than Röder had anticipated. Even long-standing spreadsheet enthusiasts quickly overcame any initial scepticism when they saw Qlik's potential and how it could align with the company's broader strategy.

"Suddenly they had daily reports showing them rankings, exception reports and stuff a spreadsheet can't do because you're waiting for an accountant or admin clerk somewhere to update a file or macro," Röder explains. "It spread like wildfire; suddenly Qlik was the hype word around the company. Everybody was on board within a year."

Faster data, better decisions

Qlik's deployment across Unitrans is classified into two main categories: internal and customer-facing. Within the business, Qlik is enabling vastly improved reporting, with new levels of speed and accuracy enabling the business to take more control over its operations.

Data sources can be sanitized and cross-referenced and files merged to provide a single point of reference for users. Dashboards and reports are as good as the data that's put in and Qlik has also helped with ongoing data hygiene to maintain the quality and integrity of data.

This simplifies access to critical information and analysis, while also providing a reliable and centralized source of the truth for essential management information.

Tools and dashboards built on Qlik include fuel management, workshop and planning systems, and a tracking database that monitors past vehicle activity. All these contribute to Unitrans' auto asset verification system, a quarterly exercise similar to a stock count that verifies all Unitrans assets across Africa.

"It's a massive exercise. In the past we've even found a ZAR two million truck that we didn't realize existed," says Röder. "With Qlik it's much quicker and much more controlled – and we know exactly where all our assets are."

Month-end processes are also significantly accelerated, with reporting times cut by half. With Qlik, what was previously a ten-day process is now usually completed in five days, enabling more timely management decisions and quicker responses.

"Just having information five working days earlier means managers can make much more effective decisions on, for example, overdue accounts," Röder notes. "From a risk point of view, it's absolutely vital to have that kind of information as quickly as possible. The security that Qlik provides in terms of cross-referencing permissions and control systems also delivers important risk-management advantages."

Delivering cultural change

Customer-facing information is the other key area where Qlik shines. Clients once had limited visibility into where a load or shipment was on its journey. Now, using Qlik, processing telematics and tracking information and then presenting it to the client as a dashboard transforms the experience.

"A Qlik dashboard can tell clients where their products are all over the country, even the continent," says Röder. "Maps show the locations of each truck, which means arrivals and turnarounds can be planned more effectively."

The next steps for Unitrans include deploying Qlik Cloud® expanding the use of automation for repetitive processes and deploying Qlik AutoML™. "Robotic Process Automation has already delivered significant time savings. Now we're plugging AutoML into that," Röder says.

"Instead of using RPA for reporting we'll use Qlik, which means the RPA developers can focus on the solutions and BI guys can do the reporting."

Röder also cites Qlik's software-as-a-service option as both an opportunity and an inevitable strategic shift for Unitrans. More broadly, Röder now sees a process of cultural change, enabled by Qlik, spreading across Unitrans, with him acting as enabler and gatekeeper.

"We now have an environment where people are able to think innovatively on a continuous basis," he says. "If one individual can find a way for Qlik to make them more informed and more effective in their job, it might be scalable for 20 other people in similar roles – or even the whole organization. That's a game changer for us."

The keys to success

Time to complete month-end reporting halved

One year to deploy across the business

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About Qlik

Qlik's vision is a data-literate world, where everyone can use data and analytics to improve decision-making and solve their most challenging problems. A private company, Qlik offers real-time data integration and analytics solutions, powered by Qlik Cloud, to close the gaps between data, insights and action. By transforming data into Active Intelligence, businesses can drive better decisions, improve revenue and profitability, and optimize customer relationships. Qlik serves more than 38,000 active customers in over 100 countries.

qlik.com

About B2IT

B2IT provides businesses with software solutions that improve their business processes and increase productivity and efficiency. These solutions include business intelligence (BI), active intelligence (AI), business process management (BPM) and robotic process automation (RPA).

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