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From Lagging to Leading: How Real-Time Data Enhanced Performance and Cost Efficiency at ServiceStream

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Historical data is nice, but real-time data has so much more value. When analysing factors like job performance and costs, businesses need that information now—not six weeks from now. This delay is exactly the problem we grappled with at utility company Comdain.

Comdain began as a small family company and grew until ServiceStream purchased it in 2019. Comdain's two main lines of business being gas and water infrastructure and construction and maintenance, we handle everything from water treatment plants and small dams to large construction projects and maintenance activities. These verticals complemented ServiceStream's strengths in telecommunications and fibre optics throughout Australia. As Comdain became part of a publicly traded company, we encountered more rules and regulations. But even years before, we realised we didn't have the real-time data to manage our job contracts effectively.

Reporting Lag Makes It Difficult to Manage and Perform

We won the contract in 2012 and expanded in 2017 to the entire MultiNet Gas Network (730,000 end customers). Our reporting structure needed to scale and enhance to meet this contract need.

We have 100,000 jobs per year across 170 different line activities. Some jobs (like reading a gas meter) take 10 minutes, while others could take a month to complete. Each of these activities has a predetermined rate. Productivity and efficiency are key under this contract model. Our focus is cost management, time management, quality and productivity.

We needed to manually analyse financials post month-end resulting in up to a 7-week lag in actuals. This, then, made it too late to fix anything about a particular job, whether it was an issue with crew structure or an unavoidable weather-related costing issue. We couldn't reverse the trend line as we'd already spent that money—the only option was to focus on the month ahead.

We had a ton of data from the field but no way to bring it all into one place in real time. We needed these insights to know—daily—who was doing what, how long it was taking, and the costs involved.

A Data Partner's Suggestion Put Us on the Right Path

Having worked with our data partner Cast Solutions for several years, I took our reporting problems to Rob Lange, Cast General manager and Operations lead, and explained what I wanted to achieve:

The ability to produce reports overnight, so we could notice trends—particularly jobs losing money—and react quickly enough to improve the situation.
The ability to drill down to the job level to understand any potential costing or workforce issues Rob and his team at Cast developed a good understanding of our business from previous consulting opportunities. Once they listened to our desires, they suggested Qlik as the solution.

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Qlik reporting and dashboards would help me in the day-to-day running of the business and address our concerns. Cast also showed me how Qlik had been applied at similar companies, and in those examples, I saw Qlik's potential for our business.

We get great value from working with Cast, primarily because we have direct access to the right person. We have previously worked with other technology partners, where I would ring someone and get passed off two or three times. "We're going to fix the problem for you," they'd tell me, but the issues remained. By contrast, I can ring up Cast, where someone always

answers the phone and has an answer for me within a few minutes. It was a refreshing change, and we knew that working alongside them for our Qlik implementation would guarantee its success.

A Complete Overview of Activities

A real-time view of daily activities allows companies to reduce costs, increase productivity, and correct errors.

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One of the first reports we developed was to analyse our jobs by activity. As mentioned, we perform 170 different activities. Now, we can explore our performance within each category, looking at the breakdown of costs spent on equipment, material, contractors, and labour for those jobs.

If we did 10 jobs yesterday and I see one of those jobs was a problem, I can examine that point further to uncover the issue. Sometimes it's a simple matter of someone inputting the wrong material, and when I correct it, the costs right themselves. Other times, the issue is more complex. Either way, I have a complete overview of yesterday's activities that I can easily pull apart in seconds.

Qlik helps with our internal communication, too. Overnight, Qlik pulls all the data from the field, so when supervisors come in the next morning, they have reports on the previous day's activities of their four or five crews. Supervisors are often in contact with their crews throughout the day, so if a crew member has said, "I've got a problem and I'm going to be on this job longer than planned," the supervisor won't be surprised to see that in the report the next day.

On a busy day, the supervisor might not be up to speed on every crew, which is why it's so helpful to see the data in Qlik the next day, not seven weeks later. They can follow up on those problem jobs, and they know that their manager—who has a higher-level view of the activities—will want answers, too. And with the latest data in front of them, they can check with crews and provide those answers.

When Everyone Understands the Costs, Work Is Better for Everyone

Improved reporting has allowed us to reduce costs, increase productivity, and correct errors quickly. We can also look at weekly and monthly trends to see where we can improve.

We also use the data to develop a stronger workforce. Managers are asking more questions of supervisors, who are asking more questions of their crews, which creates greater accountability throughout the organisation. Crews now see the connection between pay increases and job performance, resulting in better job performance. We can also look at underperformers and determine why they're underperforming, which might be training, equipment, or other people on the crew.

Real-time reporting is critical to running a modern business.

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Qlik helps us demonstrate that we are driving down costs and gives everyone—from management to clients to company shareholders—a realistic picture of what those costs are. When bidding on a new contract or renewing an existing one, clients love to see that we have reliable, near real-time data and these reporting processes are in place. They can see that we are mindful of costs and committed to operating as efficiently as possible. And we can provide insight into why some costs may still increase despite these efficiencies: Our crews may take more time on certain jobs if there are new safety procedures, for example. Similarly, I can justify increased costs to senior leadership, such as if a stretch of wet weather means crews are taking more time.

Qlik has pushed us forward in our data-driven journey. We've spoken with other Service Steam teams and our new finance manager, and got the approval from corporate to expand our Qlik use. We're keen to take this to the next level and take everyone along. We have a lot of tradespeople who may not be the most tech-savvy, but they can still access and use these reports. That's a big plus: Qlik makes it so easy, everybody can do it. Real-time reporting is critical to how a business runs, and Qlik offers us the capabilities to run our business better.

About Cast Solutions
Cast Solutions is an Australian-based business advisory and data analytics solutions provider. It provides strategic advice and data-driven insights, solutions and the confidence to make meaningful business decisions. It has extensive experience across diverse sectors including engineering, technology and infrastructure. By using the latest in innovative technology, including AI and machine learning technology, it is able to enhance business performance and growth. castsolutions.com.au

About Qlik
Qlik, with the recent addition of Talend, delivers an industry leading portfolio of solutions for data integration, data quality, and analytics. This includes advancements in real-time, AI, ML, and automation. The most successful organizations are investing in data to make sense of the increasing amounts and varieties of data from diverse sources. The challenge is to effectively integrate, analyze, and act on the data while ensuring its trustworthiness. With more than 40,000 active customers in over 100 countries, Qlik's solutions work with any data source, target, architecture or methodology, to ensure customers have the data they need, whenever they need it. Qlik.com