

# Unlock a vault full of data

**By Elliot Schiller** You can save your aging computer and turn it into an information powerhouse



You may be aware that business is down with some of your largest customers, but do you know which customers are showing an upturn in profit? Do you even know who your most profitable customers really are? What about your inventory? Could you easily find out if your color and size ratios are veering away from the norm?

Your computer system knows, even if it is 20 years old. Hidden somewhere in its deepest recesses, like precious jewels within a giant vault, lie the answers to the most important questions concerning your business. But do you have the key?

Many businesses today still use computer systems designed years, or even decades, ago. Created primarily for the purpose of record keeping, these systems produced comprehensive, detailed reports that typically adhered to weekly or monthly intervals and consisted of 40- to 60-page documents — themselves requiring, more often than not, a week or two to digest.

Does this sound like your system? Then you're not alone. A company can invest only so many dollars in tools, and there are so many tools worth investing in. With the need for CAD systems, EDI send/ receive systems, RF warehouse systems and perhaps even RFID systems — plus a host of other nice-to-haves — modernizing your record-keeping (or, dare I say, ERP) system likely ranks toward the bottom of your priority list. But that doesn't mean you can't find a way to get those precious jewels out of the old vault.

## Business Intelligence Systems

Business Intelligence, or BI, systems supplement existing systems by consolidating the information contained within your computer and generating precise answers to specific questions. These highly affordable systems synthesize and repackage data in a user-friendly, point-and-click manner. Acting as highly organized data warehouses, BI systems are designed with the express goal of allowing users to retrieve information in a straightforward way. Imagine standing at the threshold of a vast warehouse full of endless corridors and intricate passageways, yet at the same time being able to press a single button and have a specific item brought directly to you. BI systems imitate this experience: You ask a question, and the system, filtering through extraneous data, generates the answer, quickly.

With this type of tool in your arsenal, suppositions based on anecdotal or historical evidence can transform into facts — or falsehoods. Through a headache-free process, BI systems produce rich, relevant snapshots revealing, for example, how profitable that new line really is, which colors are truly moving faster than others or which orders are the most profitable ones to

fill. The ability to analyze your business from limitless angles carries with it tremendous implications: By anticipating the right questions, you can generate the right answers — enabling you to fix problems before they balloon, increase your investment where business is most promising, and make properly informed decisions regarding customers, products, vendors and prices.

Not only do BI systems facilitate accurate decisions; they facilitate fast ones. In today's high-pressure world of instantaneous reporting, finger-touch response and don't-look-back decision making, BI systems can be invaluable. Two decades ago, one might typically observe management and staff mulling over a customer issue while sifting through reams of data, hoping the right nugget of information would eventually rise to the surface. With a BI system in place, the scenario transforms: The two groups, having generated precise questions about that customer — at lightning speed — now have the clear-cut answers in front of them and stand poised for a targeted, efficient discussion.

*Business intelligence systems offer an economical way to supplement and save your current system and to give management the tools it needs for assessing the company's strengths, measuring its performance and uncovering areas for improvement.*

With everyone in the organization using the same data to make decisions, inefficiency is replaced by consistency. Put another way, those who implement BI systems no longer need to answer the vexing question that haunts those with older systems: "How come this report has a different number than that one?"

Your data is as vital a corporate asset as you possess. Think of the immense value lying inherent in all the information you've stored over the past 10 to 20 years — and in how many different ways that value could be utilized if only it could be extracted.

So where does a BI system get its information from? Surely, you are thinking, not from my antiquated, user-averse, "CAPS lock on" system. In fact, that's exactly where the data so crucial to a BI system resides. Even the world's oldest computer system, properly linked, can deliver business intelligence. Believe it or not, it's probably doing it electronically for your EDI customers right now.

## Where do I start?

The main challenge of a BI system is not the cost to license the software associated with it; such licenses are competitive — and therefore affordable — commodity products. The major portion of the investment lies in extracting the data from your existing system to populate the "data warehouse." To minimize costs to users of BI systems, system integrators specializing in the sewn products industries have designed each "aisle" with information particular to the trade, defining and populating the "warehouse" by spreading the cost over many companies, each paying only a fraction of the development cost.

Many a pundit has been telling us that the three-pronged recipe for success in the wake of WTO 2005 is to determine what you are good at, focus on it and find ways to do it even better. Business intelligence systems offer an economical way to supplement and save your current system and to give management the tools it needs for assessing the company's strengths, measuring its performance and uncovering areas for improvement.

Put more plainly, adding a BI solution to your old system can give it a new lease on life, transforming it from a basic record-keeping tool to an invaluable information resource for many years to come. Perhaps most important, this step can allow organizational leaders to overcome the limitations of their dated systems without having to spend thousands of dollars on new ones, thereby disrupting the organization and consuming valuable time and resources.

Like the data in our computers, many of us store away our most prized objects and then forget about them, sometimes for years. We keep them in safety deposit boxes or safes or vaults and pay them little thought. As a result, it becomes easy to forget just how much value they hold.

On one hand, you might feel the effort to open the vault isn't worthwhile, since you get by sufficiently with your current system.

On the other, just imagine what you might find. ■

*Elliot Schiller is co-founder of Teeger Schiller Inc., a management consulting firm serving clients in Toronto, Montreal and New York. Teeger Schiller advises companies on the selection and implementation of computing systems and facilitates the procurement of government grants and tax incentives to help fund production efficiency improvement initiatives and R&D expenditures. Teeger Schiller has recently created Information Analyzer®, a Business Intelligence (BI) tool designed specifically to provide management with the information it needs to make better-informed business decisions.*

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## David Teeger

### Director

David Teeger C.A., C.A. (S.A.) graduated as a Chartered Accountant in South Africa, and upon arrival in Canada he obtained his Canadian C.A. designation and joined Richter & Associates, a management consulting firm, where he concentrated his practice on various business sectors including household goods, fashion, automotive parts, public associations, and retail chains. He performed many roles in his 15 years at Richter, including managing the professional services organization in North America and all business operations throughout Europe.

David's professional capabilities include computer audits, feasibility studies, system analyses and assistance in the selection, negotiation and implementation of computerized solutions.

As a founding partner of Teeger Schiller Inc., he has focused his practice on consulting to management. His team of professionals has helped businesses select and successfully install a variety of ERP business solutions and add-on systems including business intelligence solutions to give new life to existing computer systems. David's clients not only rely on him to successfully manage the implementation of their new systems, but to manage the change that occurs in their organizations as a result of the use of these new tools.



## Elliot Schiller

### Director

Elliot Schiller, Ph.D., C.M.C. began his career as a Chemical Engineer working for Grumman Aircraft, in Long Island, New York. He obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Pittsburgh with funding from the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, and, after being awarded a Presidential Fellowship, he went on to perform research and development activities at Brookhaven National Laboratory.

Since coming to Canada, he has primarily assisted consumer products and retail organizations in a variety of strategic management initiatives, traveling around the globe on behalf of his clients. In 1987, Elliot joined Richter & Associates, and it is here that he first met David Teeger.

As a founding partner of Teeger Schiller Inc., he has focused the SR&ED / Grant Division on obtaining grants and tax incentives for over 100 companies in the small to medium sized business sector. His team has provided services to the discrete / processing manufacturing, material development, textiles, apparel, automotive and computer sciences sectors. Annually, Teeger Schiller Inc. secures more than \$5 million in government funding to assist its clients in having their business initiatives supported by government funding.



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