

Small IBM i Shops Find Simple, Inexpensive Reporting Options

by Dan Burger

What the young programmer learns usually follows him deep into his career. An example that comes to mind is query and report. Most programmers learned how to do this with IBM's Query/400, which was a fine product in its day, and is still immensely popular. But familiarity breeds content for many programmers. Unfortunately that's not true for end users. Generating reports with Query/400 has its limits and most companies exceeded those limits years ago.

Even the small businesses that make up 80 percent of the IBM i community have hit the wall. They are mostly short on staff and short on budget. What they're not short on is unsatisfied users who are tired of paper-based reports and information that is out of date before they receive it. This is not an uncommon problem.

"Query/400 has always had limitations," says Larry Middleton, a veteran of more than two decades in the IBM midrange. "I was looking for a product that was more flexible in that it could produce more than a spool file or data files. Email is the central source of communication for most companies these days and producing a PDF or a spreadsheet is a lot more advantageous than producing a text file."

You'll hear a similar story from John Lynch, whose company was heavily dependent on Query/400 reports until about a year ago. Users there relied on queries that outputted Excel files to folders in the integrated file system (IFS), where users gained access. It was a workable solution, but not pain free. The conversion from Query/400 to Excel created formatting problems. Like a bad case of double vision with no available cure, users had to live with it.

Both of these IT managers operate with limited budgets and staff. Lynch has one additional person on his IT staff. Middleton has only himself. Both of them discovered a better way of reporting and distributing data with a software development tool kit that cost \$895, which includes a year of software maintenance, online and telephone training, and telephone support.

This is BI on a budget. You may think of business intelligence as something else--more expensive and more complex--but for the real world needs of many small businesses, this is what is most needed. In any business of any size, people require useful data in a timely and convenient manner in order to be successful.

If it sounds too good to be true, beware, right? I like your skepticism. Here's a better explanation of what you get for your money.

To begin, let's take the mystery out of this by saying this offer comes from New Generation Software. It's what is referred to as the Software Development Kit for its NGS-IQ product. The package price is for a single developer and one concurrent user license, which is a starting point.

A single developer can design Web reports and other types of output while the one concurrent user license on the host means one user at a time can run those reports. The one concurrent user license could satisfy a small group of users who occasionally need to run a report, but for a larger group of users, the minimum license would need to be expanded.

Neither Middleton nor Lynch is creating Web-based reports at this time. Both are primarily creating reports as PDFs or Excel spreadsheets and distributing those reports via email.

The reports that Lynch builds extract most of their data from a BPICS ERP system. They require very little programming and the built-in email function of NGS-IQ keeps things simple.

"With Query/400, you have your hands tied," Lynch says. "Being able to use record selection opens a new world of queries for us. I would sometimes run three, four, or five queries in a row to get a final output. Being able to expand on the selection eliminated almost all of that. And the simplicity of matching run-time parameters is far easier. That's a pain in Query/400."

Most users do not require Web-based HTML files, but that could change when some users realize that Web-based reports can reflect current circumstances and email reports are a snapshot in time that are updated at intervals that may or may not meet the definition of current.

Both IT managers describe their capabilities with NGS-IQ as borderline intermediate.

"I'm new with NGS (started using it in 2013), but I am using the heck out of it," Middleton says. "In a one-man shop, you are multi-tasking all the time. NGS gave me immediate support when I needed it. They are very patient and they help you understand how to do something rather than just doing it for you without teaching you how. We had a 30-day trial of the product and I learned then how good their tech support was."

"There's a lot more functionality with this tool than I can do at the level I am now," says Lynch. "But I can explore and try different things. We've created about 60 new reports with NGS--a real variety of stuff primarily for sales and accounting, but also for manufacturing and engineering."

Taking the discussion beyond reporting, data access, and business intelligence, Middleton introduced the idea of implementing a tool that users who are unfamiliar with RPG could be comfortable using. He also plans to train several people in departments outside of IT to create reports. "I'm just a year away from retiring," he added.

NGS-IQ is a suite of business intelligence and reporting software that runs on IBM i and Windows, with more than 25,000 users worldwide according to New Generation Software. The suite includes an array of BI needs, including ad hoc query, Web reporting and drill-down, OLAP, dashboarding, and KPIs. For additional product details, see the NGS website.