



Great Rail Journeys

Client Overview

Great Rail Journeys, a £100m York-based enterprise, provides multi-centre escorted rail tours to the culturally interested traveller, with over 300 different itineraries to over 60 countries.

Client Response

"This business is a business that's delivering really high levels of data to its management team, to its board. And, therefore, is in a really good place to take the next strategic steps because it knows what it's doing"

Peter Liney, CEO

“There simply was no single version of the truth around data. That was creating very difficult business conversations because we would spend more time arguing about the source of the data than we would about the actual data itself.”

Peter Liney
CEO

Case Study

Great Rail Journeys

Great Rail Journeys embark on an adventure to the cloud as they look for one version of the truth.

Key Benefits

- One universally accepted version of the truth, actively used by everyone
- VC/Analyst reporting with the same numbers used to run the business
- Marketing campaigns with lower conversion costs due to better personalisation
- Happier customers, as Operations can respond effectively using real-time data
- IT resources deployed on building customer facing capabilities, not running reports
- More leverage in supplier negotiations, based on accurate, timely reporting

Summary

In April 2013, private equity group, ECI Partners, acquired a controlling stake in Great Rail Journeys. With an eye for adding value, they sought to unleash the capabilities of the business through the power of robust, trusted management information. This required replacing several disparate legacy systems with a new business-wide Management Information System (MIS), that now uses Microsoft Analysis Services and Power BI together with a Microsoft Azure based data warehouse. The project was delivered in three consecutive tranches: phase 1: Finance and Sales; phase 2: Marketing; phase 3: Operations. External project management was brought in, successfully delivering phase 1, and creating positive momentum for the following elements.

Simply no single version of the truth

As the new CEO of Great Rail Journeys, Peter Liney quickly established, as he familiarised himself with those handling the day to day running of the business, that there was simply no single version of the truth. With six different uses of ‘year’ and twenty-two variants of ‘booking’, the opportunity for error was manifest.

To compound the situation, access to management information, held within a handful of bespoke legacy systems, was via a request to IT to run a SQL report.

“Over a period of four or five years we built up a set of different analytical reports and extracts for different parts of the business, ostensibly to address the same business questions, but tailored to individual report sponsors.”

Mark Taylor, IT Director

The inevitable consequence was a logjam in the smooth running of the business – slower decision-making, less transparency and limited time to engage in considering future needs.

“...that was creating a very difficult situation in business conversations because we would spend more time arguing about the source of the data than we would about the actual data itself and what the data was telling us about the business”

Peter Liney, CEO

As CEO, Peter’s own requirements were for high level commercial information drawing together data for marketing demand, sales conversion and commercial profit, plus an ability to ask and answer questions of it quickly. Finally, he needed it delivered in a format applicable across the business, without generating additional layers of administration.

The in-house dilemma (Phase 1a)

When Peter first sought ‘a single version of the truth’, the ensuing project proved challenging for what in hindsight proved all too understandable reasons. With motivated senior managers, highly capable of driving their area of the business forward, seeing the benefits inherent in a single version of the truth was easy. Applying that logic in an independent manner, separate from their own department’s very real experiences proved to be a big culture change.

“I couldn’t get the different business streams to agree around a single version of the truth. They all believed there already was a single truth; it was just their version.”

Peter Liney, CEO

Bringing in the professionals (Phase 1b)

The solution was professional change management; someone who could force decisions to drive the process forward. With that fundamental shift in approach, the impossible became merely difficult. Once phase 1 was delivered, for the core financial & sales management systems of the business, it was clear to the board and exec level management that it worked; that it was good for the business.

“We chose the financial element for phase 1. Hard to deliver, but the place where expertise lies. It would have been a mistake to choose something on the periphery – this gave us the weight of impact to drive through subsequent phases.”

Peter Liney, CEO

Cultural shift

With momentum established, Phase Two - Marketing was much easier to drive, despite the inevitable blips that come with all change projects.

“Although we may have been over-ambitious with the timeline, Phase Two was completed with extremely positive results and a legacy of changing the culture of the business for years to come.”

Alex Roberts, Marketing & Sales Director

Hearts and minds of participants were now in the right place, following the success of phase 1, which created a critical mass of supporters in the business. People witnessed daily that decision making was so much better; finally, staff could have meaningful discussions - about the story behind the data, not the data. By the time of phase 3 – Operations, buy-in was easy for a team passionate about delivering great service to the customer.

As the MIS is rolled out, it is those running the business who use it the most. Middle and senior management want to make good decisions – they just didn’t have the information to do so before. Now, they are empowered; everyone is better equipped to do their job.

Nothing short of a cultural change had occurred.

“I think it took us until we delivered phase one for people to really buy into it. And to see that it just made our lives easier. And to see that the conversations we are having at a business level were that much better. I think it actually required a leap of faith to get us there. But once we got there, people really bought into it.”

Peter Liney, CEO

“I’m very happy that we’ve gone down this route. We’re seeing benefits in finance, we’re seeing benefits in marketing and I’m sure we’ll see benefits in operations as well”

Martin Johnson, Finance Director

“What MIS has become is very much part of how we do business, and the challenges around it have gone”

Peter Liney, CEO

Marketing: Power in the details (Phase 2)

Great Rail Journeys’ marketing had always performed well but its ability to move forward was compromised by how their data was siloed. Phase 2 was more challenging purely because of the amount of work needed to curate the data to define common definitions, common processes and agree the measures and KPIs.

Marketing now operates with a far higher level of personalisation; customers can be spoken to about potential holidays based on their own history. Not only is this more effective, it is less wasteful and therefore lower cost.

Customer journeys can now be better customised.

“The data in its current format and the way in which we access it has allowed us to think differently about customers based on their position within the customer journey. So, a customer who’s just come into the business is very different to a customer who’s booked five times. We’re able to build MI around those individual customer cohorts. And with that MI, cast marketing campaigns that are specific to them”

Alex Roberts, Marketing & Sales Director

Detailed interrogation of real-time data has enabled the team to be more responsive to events as they occur and take the decisions to improve performance. The end result has been a marked improvement in marketing conversion rates – a core goal for all digital marketing teams.

Operations: From frustration to happiness (Phase 3)

When a Great Rail Journeys’ customer requests a variation to an aspect of their trip, it creates a real moment of truth for the business. The ability to manage variations such as upgrades, trips or extensions is a key aspect of any customer’s holiday experience. At the most basic level, cost and time taken are the two ways in which that experience is judged by the purchaser. Great Rail Journeys was struggling to manage both, generating customer complaints and a consequent loss of business.

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Alex Roberts
Marketing & Sales Director



Data Warehousing

“I really think that Great Rail Journeys have barely scratched the surface on the potential that we have with Power BI. On a daily basis myself and other users across the business are performing analysis that wasn’t easy to get to previously. Going forward we’re going to develop a suite of reports in Power BI to give detailed analysis at people’s fingertips.”

Steven Hood
Commercial Accountant

Following the implementation of phase 3, that situation was completely reversed. A team passionate about customer service was finally able to set about delivering on the promise - something that had been frustrated by the previous system.

“the information that’s been put through will most definitely change and revolutionise the operations department”

Noeleen Pritchard, Operations Director

Knowing a customer is unsatisfied, quickly enough to do something about it helps turn potential bad experiences and loss of business, into great experiences and brand promoters.

Dealing with the owners. No surprises.

As owners of Great Rail Journeys, ECI has a simple goal: to improve the business for the short and long term. To make progress towards that goal, ECI managers actually have an uncomplicated reporting need. They like to know what is happening, good or bad and they don’t like surprises, so a single version of the truth matters.

With the MIS in place, Great Rail Journeys is sharing the same data that they actually use to run the business. ECI can see the key trends of margin and profitability becoming more accurate. This gives confidence – about the business and the ability to derive future value.

“ECI love this project – they get great data, but it is also a big part of ‘professionalising the business’.

Peter Liney, CEO

“this business is a business that’s delivering really high levels of data to its management team, to its board. And, therefore, is in a really good place to take the next strategic steps because it knows what it’s doing”

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KPIs - accuracy with timeliness [As at]

Performance vs last year is a common measure of progress; getting it in detail and right up to date is more of a challenge. Great Rail Journey’s MIS operates with an ‘As at’ option, that allows just that: the performance ‘as at’ close of business yesterday vs the exact same period in the previous year, always up to date, for any attribute, segment, product, or division. Timeliness is no longer compromised for accuracy. Over and underperformance are rapidly identified, allowing the business to respond accordingly. It has created a common way of thinking, using a common language across the business.

“What the MIS system we’ve got can do is deliver that ‘As at’ reporting on any data we want and deliver results very very quickly. To give us that visibility about what was happening in the market to our business on any day in any week of any prior year and that’s hugely important and valuable to us.”

Martin Johnson, Finance Director

Platform stability for flexibility in delivery

Great Rail Journeys IT Director, Mark Taylor, was clear that the data warehouse layer was of primary importance – a clean data layer first. The software used to analyse the data, and serve it up to the various departmental users could come afterwards, potentially even using third party agencies. In fact, a planned spend to procure Business Intelligence software was shelved as the power of Microsoft Analysis Services (SSAS) and PowerBI built upon the SQL Server data warehouse was realised.

Cloud the clear choice

Hosting was a key issue and on-premise, albeit with its accompanying hardware capital investment requirements, remained an early option. However, sizing it to scope the costs was difficult, given the unknowns in the early stages. Cloud, in the form of Microsoft Azure was the other option, allowing the company to get moving very quickly.

“Azure allowed us to go live with the project immediately. It allowed us to test it and find out and mitigate some of the concerns that we had regarding the bandwidth coming into the building, how it would really work for us. And if it didn’t work we could always go back to on-premise and purchase it at that point but we didn’t have that upfront cost.”

“It’s really performed for us. It’s allowed us to grow. We’ve been able to extend the size of that platform as required” .

Mark Taylor, IT Director

Releasing the power of IT

Great Rail Journeys’ IT department now delivers for the business in a very different way. Using Microsoft Azure means that all the IT processing takes place outside of the business, directly reducing the IT maintenance and performance management burden.

As for supporting the decision-making processes of the company, the days of hourly requests to create SQL queries as a mainstay of IT activities are long gone. The key focus today is delivering an international web-based trading system that enables the company to do business around the world in multiple currencies.

"...they are frankly far more valuable to me now than they were three years ago, because they are doing development of IT solutions for the business which really help us trade."

Peter Liney, CEO

Working with Simpson Associates

Data and analytics were of upmost importance to the project; Great Rail Journeys needed a partner that understood how data can be effectively used by a business.

"Whereas a lot of suppliers were coming into it saying you must use qlikview or you must use a tableau, what Simpsons recognised was we were looking to develop the data warehouse layer first and were business tool agnostic. Simpsons and the Microsoft platform have proved to be ideal partners and have built a valued BI platform."

Mark Taylor, IT Director

"My experience of working with Simpsons was overwhelmingly good. What impressed me was their commitment to getting this right. This is complex stuff. And it's not easy. We have complexity in our data. There are idiosyncrasies in our data that don't exist in any other business and that's not easy to work with. And Simpsons stuck with it."

Alex Roberts, Marketing & Sales Director

"We chose Simpsons following their proposal and presentation to us on the basis that the proposal was comprehensive. It had clearly demonstrated that they understood the business. They certainly understood the problems that we had and knew what we were trying to achieve. The proposal set out a way of working which I recognised was addressing both our strengths and our weaknesses and would get the project over the line in the best way possible."

Martin Johnson, Finance Director



Microsoft's mission statement is to "Empower every person and organisation on the planet to achieve more". By changing the way that we use software in the work place, Microsoft is developing new ways to make business more efficient and effective, empowering employees so they can achieve more and in turn doing "things, that make a difference".

Simpson Associates are a software and services consultancy who have been delivering new capabilities to organisations for over 25 years. As a Microsoft Gold Partner for Data Platform and Analytics and a Cloud Platform partner, we are practicing what we preach and we believe that we have the necessary skills and experience to help you in your quest for increased productivity.