



## DATA THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Park Group has traded for nearly forty years in services from staged-payment goods purchase to catalogue and electronic gift products.

The Love2Shop range is the leading Park product today; paper and electronic vouchers that can be redeemed at multiple retailers online and in store. As the company's services develop the complexities of service management increase, as does the importance of maintaining accurate data in an efficient and reportable manner.

### KEY TOPICS & BENEFITS:

- Smooth system migration from Legacy systems
- Cost reductions
- Improved data production times
- Faster, more flexible reporting
- Positive user feedback



## REPORTING NEEDS OF THE BUSINESS

Tony Morris, Park Group Head of Business Intelligence, is responsible for Reporting, Analysis and Forecasting for the business.

He sponsored the change within the last 18 months from a Legacy solution to a Microsoft business intelligence stack that incorporates XLCubed.

Tony highlights the criticality of reporting to meet the FCA's strict compliance obligations.

Park has an obligation to its customers to cover what has been bought and to retailers to settle vouchers. The FCA monitors whether companies can meet obligations if their liabilities were called upon at any given time.

He credits XLCubed with assisting Park to report to the FCA speedily and accurately.



## IMPROVED CITY UNDERSTANDING

XLcubed's capability to report easily and flexibly on sales demographics has helped the understanding of Park Group in the City. The Park CEO's periodic reports to the City demonstrate Park's consistent nationwide appeal and associated sales by region and retailer, which objectively answer any misconceptions the market has about the company as a predominantly northern entity.

## THE IMPETUS FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE

The need for change was necessitated by two key business drivers: (1) liberating data for wider use and flexible analysis, and (2) the need for speed and self-serve

From a developer's point of view, Tony explains, working with the previous system was antiquated, "like going back many years. The developers were stuck in Notepad and did not have agile tools. Everything was regimented for users and there was little possibility for customisation."

Restrictive processes placed a heavy strain on Tony's team, as the BI unit was constantly being asked to create and amend reports because users could not 'slice and dice' data themselves.

The consequence of slow, cumbersome data analysis processes was that the business was missing out on important insights.

The data was 'all there', but its use was restricted by limited and inflexible standard reports.

In terms of speed, the time to build, load and report on data is massively reduced in the new Microsoft / XLcubed solution.

Processing daily sales feeds took thirteen hours in the previous environment, and any problems or issues with the processing caused significant delays on data availability for the business users. Regulatory reporting requirements mean that significant historical data must be retained, and the response times of reports had become progressively slower and inconsistent over time.

In the new SQL Server SSAS/XLcubed environment, sales feeds are loaded in 90 minutes, and report response is significantly faster, which in turn has led to increased user acceptance.

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## FLEXIBLE, INTUITIVE REPORTING

**EXCEL AND XLCUBED ARE COMPLEMENTARY, WHICH PUTS AN END TO THE NEED TO WORK IN MULTIPLE APPLICATIONS.**

Long query times are a thing of the past, and the new systems are intuitive for Analysts to use. They are working in a familiar environment but without the restrictions of pivot tables, which means they can work how they want to work.

The new-found flexibility and user empowerment is reflected in the proliferation of Park's reports. Whereas with the previous system the business was constrained by a suite of 20 pre-packaged reports, Park's Web reporting portal now boasts 150 different types of report.

The reports are developed in XLcubed Excel Edition by business

users and simply published to the XLcubed Web portal. Report consumers can access the reports through their browser, where the reports remain data connected and interactive.

Tony acknowledges the wholesale improvement of business insight in new reports such as sales analysis by account, customer year-to-date activity and purchase trends, all of which are generated without recourse to the BI team.

## THE ART OF BETTER STORYTELLING

With a more inclusive system that everyone feels comfortable with, there has been much stronger user take up. The Finance, Marketing and Sales Departments now have the flexibility they need to present data as required, and to explain the context and story behind the baseline numbers.

For once, there is a single version of the truth. There is less ambiguity about arguments that raged in the past, such as about the nature of a sale – is it when a product is ordered or when it is invoiced? A unified sales figure can now be agreed on.

## SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM INVOLVED IN THE DECISION TO SWITCH

As switching Park's data infrastructure from the legacy system was such a critical decision, senior management was involved from the outset, including CEO and FD.

There was a desire to have access to easy-to-understand information, which also offered high levels of certainty.

## SIGNIFICANT COST SAVINGS

Tony describes the reaction of the business to the new system as "overjoyed." XLCubed is described as ten-times more usable than the previous system, while implementation has translated into material cost savings.

With much reduced load times, Park has been able to reduce its server requirements and associated licences. Voucher redemption cubes previously required multiple expensive Database servers that now require only a single server.

Tony describes XLCubed as a value product that represents significant savings on the licence fees previously paid.

When asked to talk further about reactions within Park to the cost/benefits of the new MS stack and XLCubed, Tony recalled the IT Director's description of the project as "an unmitigated success."

XLCubed has expanded in use throughout the business, to the extent that the company now has a reporting culture, which previously required too many specialists to achieve. Data runs reliably overnight and reports for Park's secure payment systems, flexecash®, can be updated in minutes, if required. In addition to the centralised data stores, XLCubed's Data Mashups allow users to analyse customers by additional dimensions on a more ad-hoc basis when required.

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## IT DIRECTOR RECOGNISES IMPROVEMENTS

Following any major systems change, the IT team's views of transition and performance improvements are worth knowing. XLCubed was delighted with the positive feedback from Park's IT Director, Steve Lock.

“The migration project has been an unmitigated success. With the old tool-set it was difficult to produce reports as we needed deep IT skills. We had a major back-log of work and unhappy internal customers. The upgrade was smooth, and the user feedback has been excellent. XLCubed has helped our users become self-sufficient in reporting, and agile in analysis. The backlog has been removed and our internal customers are once again happy.”

## XLCUBED VISUALISATION & SIMPLICITY IS KEY

Park saw effective data visualisation as a key tool to understand business performance better and ultimately to make informed and better decisions. The previous systems made visualisation difficult. When Park looked at replacement alternatives, they found that other systems also placed a heavy burden on users or required a lot of training.

XLCubed, which performs like an Excel plug-in, offered an option that was familiar and intuitive to use, that had power, and whose simplicity Tony describes as “mind blowing.” He concludes: the previous system couldn’t come close to the sophistication that it is achieved in something so simple.”

## STRESS REDUCTION & FURTHER COST REDUCTION

Tony reflects on a time when the BI team was constantly bombarded with requests to produce reports because systems required programming expertise so Park staff were not self-sufficient.

Every day Tony was tasked with transferring a 30 million row CSV file. In the background was the constant concern that whenever the thirteen hour data build failed, Park missed SLAs. His team had an on-call rota to answer the ‘fail’ calls that they received in the course of most nights.

Timely year-end reports could not be guaranteed to be produced on time and “wait” was not an answer that went down well with the FD.

The BI team’s world has changed radically with the introduction of XLCubed. “We can actually act as a Business Intelligence team again as opposed to a Technical Support unit,” says Tony. “We can interpret data and gain insight that helps the business to look forward, as opposed to just having an historical view of events.”

We are now working in systems with environments and functionality familiar to the vast majority of Analysts and Data Professionals. Users are self-sufficient and so is the business, as it no longer relies on a niche system or the expensive contractors needed to help run it.

## THERE IS A CHRISTMAS

The interview with Tony took place as the Festive season was approaching and he said that it was the first time in years that he would be able to have a Christmas break.

In previous years the very real threat of losing large amounts of data meant that the team to be on permanent alert.

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## XLCUBED V9 & SUSTAINED PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENTS

Since Park Group adopted XLCubed, XLCubed Version 9 has been launched. Tony says he was delighted with how simple it was to upgrade to V9.

At the time of researching replacement systems, Park had considered Power BI for dashboarding, but the dashboard sheets introduced in XLCubed v9 provide more flexibility in a tool that users already love, which reduces the need for training and the number of systems in the ongoing support portfolio.

Quick and regular web publishing of reports has become core to the Park culture; the proliferation of report types provides evidence of new dynamism among Analysts. Sales people are becoming accustomed to being able to look at live interactive reports rather than having to wait for data that is out of date.

