

Using Business Intelligence to Be a Beacon of Change in the Government

by Brenden Chiaramonte

There's an old saying that reminds us nothing in life is certain except two things: death and taxes. In my opinion, there's a pretty important part of the saying that's commonly left out: No one is particularly thrilled about either one.

People don't want to pay taxes, but they do want the benefits that are supposed to come along with it. If people pay thousands of dollars every year and see their lives or the world around them truly improve in some objective way, then they tend to warm up to the concept.

But when they pay all that money and drive over the same pothole every day on the way to work, that's when people start to get angry. People aren't against paying taxes—they've just been burned too many times. They want to see those funds used in the most efficient, effective ways possible, and a lot of them feel this just isn't done. In some cases, they're right.

Managing the Public's Funds Requires the Public's Trust

Effectively using that money is where I come in with my work for the Hillsborough County Tax Collector Office (HCTC). We're responsible for collecting and distributing local and state taxes and fees to various partner organizations. We essentially bridge the gap between state and local agencies. We work in conjunction with a lot of different organizations across the state, from the Department of Highway Safety to the Department of Revenue, Health, and others. On the local level, we also work as an agent for our local municipalities within Hillsborough County.

HCTC is a community partner, through and through. We collect all the local property, business, and tourist development taxes. We issue driver licenses, titles, tags, ID cards, parking placards, hunting and fishing licenses, you name it. In a macro sense, we serve as an agent for our partner agencies and all of our community members to make sure that the money that flows into our office goes where it needs to go. We make sure those funds get to fire departments, schools, municipalities, and fund various state services. Because of how vital these services are, I constantly search for ways to improve what we're doing. Both in the efficiency sense and in the quality of the work we're all able to accomplish.

As the face of the local government, we're the people you see to change the address on your license and pay your property taxes, which is why it's important we do a great job. We want to be an exemplary organization that shows other government agencies there's a better way than the status quo.

Becoming the Change You Wish to See

Over the last few years, we began to realize how much data helped us orchestrate change. We deal with countless people in multiple ways, so we collect massive volumes of data already. We wanted to find a way to put that data to good use.

We started looking into performance metrics and insights. At the start, we handled this with Excel. We created a template with a lot of conditional formatting and our management team or supervisors would upload everything they tracked into these shared files on our local drive. They constantly updated and put in more information we could use later.

Excel will only take you so far. To get real insights, find a real BI tool.

The problem wasn't just that it was time-consuming—and it was—but also that it left a lot of room for error. Any time you have humans manually entering data, mistakes are inevitable. Our system worked, mostly, and we started using it to track other things as well. Around the same time, we built a culture of performance management. We looked at customer cycle times and wait times. Very quickly, we began to realize that the Excel system wasn't giving us what we needed. We required something more powerful than a simple spreadsheet. We found another solution and, initially, it was great. It went into our systems, pulled out relevant information, and presented it in a clear, visible way.

But we could never synthesize our data. If a metric was set up as a quarterly metric, we only could parse it out on a quarterly basis. There was no way to test it weekly or monthly, or even daily. How it was built was how it stayed, which meant we didn't have the active management we desired. We could see *how* well we were doing in the last three months, but we couldn't see *why*. Even then, we knew we needed another option. But this time, we couldn't just go with an incrementally better solution.

Shattering the Status Quo

One day, I was at a conference and I started talking to someone from SME (who are a Qlik Solution Provider) about passing data out to our supervisors and empowering them to manage their team. He listened to everything I had to say and then said, "You have to check out Qlik—you're going to love it." Sadly, government moves slowly, so it took us about a year and a half of engagement to bring a vendor to the table. But when we moved in and began to dig into the power of Qlik, we realized it was the business intelligence platform we needed.

One of the things that instantly impressed me about Qlik was the ease at which we could bring data over. We were able to consolidate data sources and connect everything together in a way that just worked. But even in a larger sense, I knew this was a tool that would allow us to operate better, faster, and cheaper—all at the same time. We needed Qlik, and we needed it now.

The implementation process itself was an absolute breeze and our team quickly fell in love. Our Director of Processing Operations might have shed a tear when we brought Qlik Sense online. She was so excited because she and her management team were given access to insights we never had before.

Since we were now able to isolate individual employees, we could isolate individual skills. We have such a broad base of transactions that we oversee, so we naturally expect our staff to have a lot of knowledge. We instantly recognized Qlik as a tool that we could use to help our employees perform their best. This wouldn't be about punishment. Instead, we wanted to empower them to perform better.

The proper insights means you can find more ways to delight your customers.

With Qlik, we can look even deeper into the types of transactions and calls we get. Since we have access to that data, we can break it down. Over time, we can find out the answers to questions like: "Do we have enough people allocated to handle a title call?" Or: "Can we use this data to build models and shift employees as needed throughout the year as our business changes?"

Re-imagining Processes with Real-Time Insights

When you have a problem, the answer isn't always more staff. Especially as we try to be good stewards of the public's funds, we need to find ways to do more with less. We employed Qlik Sense to analyze our IT Help Desk tickets. We realized that Monday morning password resets were costing us a huge amount of time and money because of all the help desk interaction they required and the loss of staff productivity.

Based on what Qlik told us, we realized we could do a training session and properly educate people on how to handle the password reset themselves. Not only did this make our normally busy Mondays easier, but it also cut down on the few thousand help desk tickets related to this issue. Now, IT can allocate their time to bigger infrastructure issues and don't have to sit on the phone for 45 minutes just to help with a menial task. They're finally free to do other work that benefits us greatly.

Qlik has also helped in departments other than IT, like HR. Our 220 front-line customer service representatives are, by and large, the ones who get things done every day. As are the 30 or 40 people we have in our call center. They're the ones who serve the customers, generate business, and bring in money. Before, we looked at rating them on a yearly basis and a big category was efficiency. We assumed we wanted to get everyone in and out as quickly as possible. But that's not always the best way to serve customers.

Once we brought in Qlik, we were able to overhaul the entire process. Employees no longer felt like they had to pull 60 transactions a day to be a superstar performer. We're just as happy with someone who does 20 or 25 transactions in a day and has great customer service ratings because that means our clients are happy. Qlik lets us investigate issues holistically—not in a vacuum. We can find the balance that makes for a better work environment for our employees and a superior experience for our customers.

When trying to improve your processes, don't look at issues in a vacuum. See the whole picture. @qlik

The customers are noticing the results. I have people who come up to me and say, "This is the craziest experience I've ever had. I took the day off from work to be here and I was only here for an hour." Some people wait significantly less time. That's the power insights have provided.

While we don't have a specific dollar amount attached to the amount of savings that Qlik has provided us, it all comes back to productivity. Our managers, supervisors, and Senior Leadership team spend less time on mundane, routine administrative tasks, and are focused more on our customers and organizational improvement. Not only are we finally doing more with less, but we're saving huge amounts of money in terms of lost productivity alone.

Taking Advantage of Every Opportunity to Get Better

I'm incredibly proud to be able to say I work for a government organization with a 98% satisfaction rating. Regardless of the entity you're talking about or the state you work in, that's hard to find.

I've always taken a great deal of pride in my job and have long wanted to be the best possible steward of the public's funds. I've never liked to waste precious resources, especially when it comes to something as important as people's hard-earned money. I also pay into these funds, so I'm very cognizant of the importance.

I've stayed at Hillsborough for 17 years because this is my community. I've seen the changes we've enabled every single day. I could go elsewhere, but I've stuck around because I know I've made a difference in the place I call home.