RESEARCH NOTE
IBM COGNOS SUPPORT

THE BOTTOM LINE

IBM Cognos customers that maintain support and subscription agreements are able to improve productivity, shorten project cycle times, and extend the value of their continuously evolving business intelligence (BI) and performance management (PM) deployments.

THE CHALLENGE

As the budgets and staffing levels of IT departments shrink, it becomes more difficult for these departments to deliver value to their internal customers. In the case of business intelligence (BI) or performance management (PM), these deployments tend to generate strong benefits without requiring substantial care and feeding. However, these deployments often require ongoing IT support, as business requirements evolve and end-user populations expand. In the absence of a support and subscription agreement, an IT department is in danger of spending more time on the day-to-day care and feeding of a stable deployment and not enough time ensuring that deployments generate increasing returns over the long term.

Nucleus has observed that the vast majority of IBM Cognos customers maintain support and subscription agreements long after the go-live date of a deployment. An IBM support and subscription agreement provides customers with:

- Case resolution services in the form of online and phone-based support.
- Knowledge assets, including best practices that have been vetted by IBM Cognos, tips and techniques, and an online knowledge base.
- Product continuation in the form of point releases, fixes, and patches.

In order to find out why companies chose to maintain these support agreements, Nucleus analyzed deployments at a number of companies, including US Lumber, Blue Mountain Resorts, Martin's Point, and Ryerson.

THE BENEFITS IBM COGNOS SUPPORT

Companies that augment their IBM Cognos deployments with support are able to reduce project costs, increase system uptime, accelerate project cycle times, and improve the productivity of both IT administrators and end users.

Reduced project costs

When IT staff and end users can independently troubleshoot or answer routine questions, projects that expand or improve a deployment after the go-live date

becomes less expensive. One customer said, "*With our budget reduced in this economy, we're now relying on IBM Cognos support in order to internally do things like small deployment changes and upgrades.*" When completing projects, companies that maintain support and subscription agreements tend to use the services as part of a tiered approach, first solving problems internally, then with online or phone based support, so that funding available for third-party consultants can be utilized for the most difficult tasks. One customer that uses IBM Cognos support in this way said, "*When we migrated from Cognos 7.3 to Cognos 8.4, we spent about $4,000 on personnel costs. It would have cost three times as much to have consultants do it.*" When IT budget is preserved in this way, companies are better able to utilize consultants where returns are higher, such as configuration or integration when a deployment is being expanded to new end users or data sources.

Accelerated project cycle times

By making it easier for people to independently solve problems and build new functionality, support and subscription agreements enable companies to shorten project cycle times. Once BI or PM takes root in a company, companies often extend the value of that deployment by adding new functionality, users, or data sources. Whether these projects are completed internally or with consultants, having access to tools and assistance under a support agreement means that time to benefit will be shorter. Knowledge assets such as proven practices and tips are particularly helpful in projects because they enable developers and project architects to more rapidly plan and execute changes to a deployment. Since they are vetted by IBM Cognos, they also enable project teams to complete a project with fewer rounds of end user testing. One user said, "*We migrated from 7.3 to 8.4 in nine months. Without support, it would have taken five months longer.*"

Resources available under support agreements can reduce project cycle times by up to 20 percent.

Another customer said, "W*e relied on Cognos support when preparing the environment for the upgrade from 8.2 to 8.4. Two people each spent about two weeks on preparation, then the upgrade happened over a weekend.*" A customer who relies on the knowledge base to independently add new functionality to their deployment said, "*I'm in charge of IBM Cognos here. When something comes up in a project, the knowledge base, the Web site, and the service request tool all enable me to solve problems and answer questions in at least half the time.*"

Increased system uptime

Services available under IBM Cognos support and subscription agreements enable IT administrators to rapidly address challenges that might otherwise result in business interruption. Given the critical nature of many BI applications today, any downtime can be a significant business disruption. When this happens, it is critical to have vendor support because even though an in-house IT department may be able to handle a BI-related challenge, few can handle them quickly enough. Unfortunately, companies typically don't adequately appreciate this aspect of support because it is viewed as insurance against a bug in the application. Disruptions can come in many forms and often originate outside of the BI or PM application. For example, a major electronics distributor addressed a sudden supply chain disruption by turning to IBM Cognos — under its support and subscription

agreement — for the expertise needed to rapidly extend its BI deployment to multiple SAP instances and maintain both product availability and customer satisfaction levels.

Improved IT administrator productivity

Having access to online knowledge bases and phone-based support enables IT administrators to complete application support tasks more quickly. In the normal course of operations, all applications occasionally encounter problems that IT administrators can not independently solve. Nucleus finds that IBM Cognos users encounter such problems less frequently than is typical with other applications, but when they arise, having access to online knowledge assets and phone-based support enables staff to troubleshoot far more rapidly. These users also indicated the quality and breadth of the information available on line was better than other vendors' online knowledge bases. One customer said, "*I can answer a question or find out how to do something by using the knowledge base about a third of the time. The rest of the time I contact support. It's typically resolved in an hour of two*."

Improved end user productivity

IT administrators typically found that having a support and subscription agreement in place enabled them to rapidly and iteratively improve their IBM Cognos deployments in ways that improved end-user productivity. The ability to complete projects both internally and more quickly affects more than just project costs and timelines. When it is easy to add functionality to a deployment, IT departments are far more likely to take on a higher number of smaller projects that improve end user productivity. For example, by turning to the knowledge assets and aggressively utilizing drill-through functionality, one customer was able to generate reports in a larger number of formats, eliminating the need to build reports and manually reenter data. Another IT administrator who iteratively enhances his deployment in order to continuously improve reporting-related workflows said, "*I'm accessing the knowledge base all the time. I use it to understand how to use java script embedded in reports or drill through functionality so that I can publish reports in multiple formats or embed microbar charts in grids.*"

End users became more productive because of point releases available under support and subscription agreements. IBM Cognos product continuation provides access to fix packs and new releases, which often include enhancements such improved performance or interface changes that make tasks easier for end users. Companies often deploy them as an inexpensive way to add value to their deployments. One user said, "*We upgraded from 9.1 to 9.4. It had performance improvements that significantly accelerate report writing. The speed improvements vary depending on the report, but for some of them the difference is up to half an hour, which means people spend a lot less time sitting around.*" Another customer said, "*There are navigation improvements that enable people to find functionality and do things faster."*

Another driver of improved end-user productivity is higher system uptime. Users of IBM Cognos support say that although outages are rare, the time required to fix them and the disruption to employee workflows is minimized with support. One user said, "*I was away when there was an outage. It was resolved within a day*

or so because my people called support. But on their own, it might have taken a week or so. At year end, this would have been really disruptive."

With BI and PM, improved end-user productivity ultimately results in improved decision making. The easier it is for users to rapidly customize and run a report, the better the resulting decisions will be. For example, is taking advantage of improvements to report building speeds by using near real-time data during weekly meetings to support better pricing decisions. Similarly, if a point release makes it easier to perform queries or what-if analyses, users will perform these tasks more often, with fresher data and better decisions in the end.

CONCLUSION

Investments in annual support enable companies to increase the returns on their investments in BI or PM over the life of a deployment. After a go-live date, many aspects of a deployment will evolve. Point releases and upgrades will become available, new users will be added to the deployment, and the objectives that an organization has for a deployment will also change. When these opportunities for improving deployments arise, project managers and other IT staff are far more productive — and add far more value — when they can go straight to the vendor for knowledge and tools. The faster these people can solve problems and build new functionality, the more productive they will be, resulting in shorter project cycle times and more rapid delivery of benefits to end users such as increased productivity and better decision making.