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Customer Case Study: US Federal Government Agency

Secure Browser Access to Backend Data Changes the Analytics Game

- **Industry:** Government
- **Headquarters:** Washington, D.C.
- **Interesting Fact:** This agency processes over 20 million financial documents each year

Inefficient Systems, Painful Processes

This US government agency manages and analyzes a massive amount of data. They create quarterly portfolio and application reports based on data gathered from multiple systems in their data warehouse. They conduct lifecycle analysis on their financial portfolios and use advanced analytical models to evaluate risk.

Despite a recent data warehouse and business intelligence (BI) platform implementation, analysts found the new solutions failed to meet their needs. The Analytics Manager reports that his team couldn't access data from backend sources to write SQL queries, and just logging in to the system to generate reports could take more than five minutes. "It was incredibly painful to log in to our previous system," he says. "The remote desktop connection would actually time out before you could input your PIN to log in."

His team developed specific requirements to improve their efficiency and ability to analyze data, including:

- Access to backend data for SQL queries
- The ability to quickly run those queries and model data directly within a browser

Business Results

Improved login speed by 98%: Processes that took 5 minutes now take 5 seconds

Sped analyst onboarding by 95%: Users can be up and running on Alation within an hour instead of days

Increases trust in data: TrustCheck flags reduce the use of deprecated data

- Protection for sensitive data such as Social Security numbers
- A way to capture and share knowledge with new analysts and contractors

The Analytics Manager began looking for a solution that could meet these needs and address his department's problems. "That's when a former colleague told me about the Alation Data Catalog," he says. "When the sales guy called me and demonstrated the product, I was sold within 20 minutes."

Giving Analysts the Tools They Need

The first thing that convinced him that Alation was the right data intelligence platform for the agency was its browser interface. Now, he can access the backend data in the Greenplum Database on AWS S3 from the Alation browser.

"The things that Alation does, and does well, are my everyday bread and butter," he says. "I can log in to my computer, look at emails, jump to Alation in my browser, and make three queries all before 8 a.m. In the past, I would've put off making the queries because just logging in to the system was such a hassle."

Two other Alation features stand out for the Analytics Manager. The first is the Compose SQL query editor. "Compose was a huge differentiator between Alation and other data catalogs that didn't have the ability to write SQL code and query data within the tool," he says. "I spend a lot of time in Compose!"

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The other differentiator was Alation's TrustCheck feature. The Analytics Manager uses TrustCheck to flag any data issues right in Alation, preventing the use of deprecated or problematic data. It works directly with Compose, further simplifying his life.

He recounts a recent incident that exemplifies the value of these features to his team. It started when someone from the customer analytics group let him know that an ETL task had failed. First, the manager used Compose to identify the data in question and used Alation to send a note to the contractor to fix the issue. Then, he went to the catalog and tagged the table with a TrustCheck red

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warning flag. "Now I know that as soon as someone tries to run a query on that dataset, they'll see the flag," he points out. "I don't have to spend a lot of time sending emails to everyone who might hit this table. TrustCheck automatically works with Compose to do that for me."

Three agency departments are now implementing Alation. The analyst team was the first to use it. The initial plan was to create a team of power users and slowly ramp up usage. But when that team started using it, they discovered that Alation was so much more efficient than their previous tools, the manager decided to roll it out to everyone in his group. Two other departments are now rolling out Alation to their analysts and contractors.

Alation University Makes a Smart Tool Smarter

The Analytics Manager also relies on Alation University, a comprehensive knowledge-building offering bundled into each Alation contract, for the initial onboarding of analysts and for continuing education. Contractors who need to come up to speed quickly can also use Alation University.

"Relatively early in the sales process, our account executive gave me access to the training materials in Alation University," recalls the manager. "I was impressed by the quality and the fact that they get updated quickly whenever there's a new feature or release. I was especially excited that lessons were structured in easy-to-digest, four-to-six-minute chunks, unlike some of our training materials that are literally hours-long modules."

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"Alation University is going to save us considerable onboarding time," he continues. As he onboards new analysts and contractors, and as more agency teams ramp up their use of Alation, Alation University will become a critical training tool. The agency has historically done a three-day, in-person training to get folks up to speed on their systems. The analyst team manager notes that about half that time focused on just getting logged in and learning how to download reports and how to write, save, and share queries. Now, with a few short training modules in Alation University, users can be up and running—and writing queries—in less than an hour.

Faster Queries, More Trustworthy Results

Using the Alation data intelligence platform to catalog and query data from the agency's Greenplum Database on AWS S3 significantly improved analyst efficiency. Tasks that used to take five minutes to accomplish now take less than five seconds.

The fact that the Analytics Manager and his team can use the Compose SQL editor to quickly and securely run SQL queries on backend data from a browser interface is a game changer. Furthermore, the Alation TrustCheck feature increased trust in the data that the team uses for critical reporting. They can flag deprecated data on the spot and use Alation to record and share why data should not be used or should be used only with caution.

"Using TrustCheck is not only useful for documenting and passing knowledge to other people but also for me to document knowledge and pass it back to myself," says the manager. "I can use TrustCheck to put a deprecate flag on something, and it will remind me six months later, when I've forgotten about it, why I can't use it."

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He appreciates that there's always something new to learn about Alation. "I'm always finding new features that I didn't know about," he says. "For example, I discovered you can do PivotTables on your results set right in Compose! I use that all the time now."

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The group has purchased 300 licenses for Alation. Ramping up so many people on a new tool would have taken months. Now, each person can be up and running in about an hour with Alation University. And the analyst team manager plans to use it for ongoing training and retraining of his team. "One of Alation's real strengths is Alation University's high-quality, easy-to-approach training materials that are good for both initial user training and for refresher training," he concludes.

About the US Federal Government Agency

This office is an agency of the US federal government, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

Data Environment

- AWS S3
- Greenplum