



# **Mortgage banker unlocks data with cloud-based analytics service, gains insight, and boosts advantage**

This case study from Microsoft was written by Melanie Higgs

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Case Study by Microsoft with Sierra Pacific and Access Business Technologies

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It's a transformational time for the mortgage industry. The efficiencies of online computing offer market opportunities for companies like Sierra Pacific Mortgage that are quickly moving away from doing business using traditional paper-based processes. Taking a leadership role with cloud computing at a time when "thousands of settlement companies, notaries, investors, banks, and business partners insist on signed paper documents to complete transactions," is how Jim Connell, Chief Information Officer at Sierra Pacific Mortgage, sees the company expanding its competitive advantage.

"People are now able to get data directly from the source and verify it without having to put paper in the middle," he says. "We don't have to ask banks or employers for paper validation. Everything can be tracked electronically, according to new investor policies that enforce higher transparency and data quality standards. It's not just a matter of transitioning to a new way of doing business digitally, it's a matter of surviving. And to survive you have to be agile. We chose to align our business with the Microsoft cloud platform to adapt quickly and stay ahead of competitors."

## Better business intelligence drives competitive advantage

Sierra Pacific Mortgage has a strategy around business intelligence (BI) that's key to helping the company navigate its way into the digital era in an industry rife with numerical data. By investing in cloud-based business analytic tools that are easy to deploy, manage, and use, the company is gaining new insight into the business so it can make the best decisions.

*“To adapt quickly, you need a clear picture of what’s working and what’s not working, and that’s where BI is incredibly important,” says Connell. “We needed a better BI solution to help us understand what needs to be done to effect change and stay competitive. Easy access to actionable business analytics and accurate data means we can more efficiently originate and service mortgages for our customers.”*

## Choosing a cloud-based BI solution

Until recently, Sierra Pacific Mortgage struggled with an inflexible BI solution that was difficult to use and required technical programming every time the business requested a different way to look at the data. Nor did it supply the requisite level of detail needed to analyze productivity and sales data from the organization’s eight regional centers throughout the United States. “It was only after one of our employees brought the Mortgage BI solution from Access Business Technologies [ABT] to the attention of senior management that we realized there was a whole other way of doing BI on the Microsoft cloud,” says Gary Clark, Chief Operating Officer at Sierra Pacific Mortgage. “Fast forward a few months, and I’m sitting at a meeting when an issue came up. I launched Mortgage BI on my iPhone, identified the problem, retrieved the data I needed, and fixed it right then and there.”

It didn’t take long for Sierra Pacific Mortgage to decide on deploying the MortgageWorkSpace Suite, a cloud-based workspace offered by ABT for mortgage professionals that runs on the [Microsoft Azure](#) cloud computing environment. A component of the suite, Mortgage BI uses [Azure Power BI Embedded](#) to provide cloud-based business analytics. Sierra Pacific Mortgage uses this service to monitor the health of its mortgage business through live, interactive dashboards.

“The advantage of using the open APIs of the Microsoft Power BI service is that our programmers can leverage the excellent work that Microsoft has achieved with Power BI,” says Justin Kirsch, President and Founder of Access Business Technologies. “So, with Mortgage BI, we tailored a business analytics solution to the mortgage industry that’s flexible enough for customers to use as a basis for their own BI requirements.”

Mortgage BI also takes advantage of [Azure SQL Database](#), a managed relational database, and [Azure SQL Data Warehouse](#), an elastic data warehouse, to store Sierra Pacific Mortgage business data.

“We were impressed with how far Microsoft has evolved its Power BI solution over the past two years, with continual updates,” adds Connell. “We felt like we were investing in a product that was going to be a sustainable industry leader. Even with our highly regulated environment, we have every confidence that the Microsoft Cloud platform matches our security requirements.”

Sierra Pacific Mortgage had already deployed [Microsoft Office 365](#) cloud-based business productivity services and so took advantage of bundling the licenses into a cost-effective solution. “Mortgage BI answered our criteria for a flexible, user-friendly solution that we could scale to bring in different data sources without reworking our existing data set,” says Doug Swank, IT Senior Business Analyst at Sierra Pacific Mortgage. “Now when we make a change to one report, it automatically flows through to all the other reports. And of course, the cloud aspect reduces

maintenance overhead and simplifies IT, so we can focus on more strategic projects for the business.”

ABT deployed the bulk of the business intelligence platform for Sierra Pacific Mortgage in less than 60 days, in time for its unveiling at a regional managers’ conference in October 2016. “Because we are part of the Microsoft Cloud Solution Provider program, it simplifies the entire customer relationship so we can focus on a fast deployment,” says Kirsch. “At the conference, managers were already logging in to the solution to check their sales pipelines.”

## Drill-down capabilities boost credibility and service

Today, executives and regional operations and sales managers use two dashboards with interactive data visualizations to improve their understanding of operations and sales data across the business. To date, employees have approximately 25 reports that provide both summary information and detailed records.

“In a numbers business where we are held accountable for the data we use, this drill-down capability, right to individual loans, is very powerful,” says Connell. “In the past, it was difficult to verify calculations; now we can instantly see the numbers and confirm the validity of our work. It’s a great credibility boost that we can pass on to our customers.”

Today, a regional operations manager can track time-sensitive loan-processing procedures that must be completed to meet regulatory requirements. This helps to identify issues before they become problems. “Staff have three days to perform specific tasks after receiving a loan application,” says Clark. “For example, there is an interest rate commitment made to the borrower that has a defined expiration date, so we use Mortgage BI to track and surface those loans with approaching expiration dates. Our secondary marketing team uses the solution to identify our interest rate risk by tracking the amount of rate locks and commitments we have. Today, we’re meeting industry obligations for our customers and reducing risk for ourselves.”

## Combining data delivers new insight

Along with Mortgage BI, Sierra Pacific Mortgage uses another component in the MortgageWorkSpace to collect data from different data sources and combine it, expanding BI opportunities. Called the Mortgage Exchange, this component siphons and transforms pertinent data flowing between different systems so it’s available for analysis within Mortgage BI.

“Having more than one data source gives us information in a way that we didn’t have before,” says Connell. “Now we can make decisions based on new parameters and see things in a new light. For example, Gary came up with a new report that combines roles-based HR data and productivity measures for each regional center.”

“I discovered that I should be wary of perceptions about productivity in the business,” continued Clark. “I found that the regional center where there was a perception of underperforming actually took its loans from date of application to date of funding faster than any other office in the company.”

## Actionable insight improves productivity, accelerates the business

Managers use the new BI solution to fine-tune resource allocation by monitoring the number of loans that each loan underwriter is working on, and to measure productivity in loan throughput per job description. Sales managers can review for each branch how employees are working: what types of loans they are processing, and how many they have completed over set periods of time. “With this information, we can identify overachievers and help communicate their best practices to the rest of the organization,” says Clark. “Or we can create new training that addresses common productivity blockers.”

Clark is excited about the increased visibility he gets into the sales pipeline, especially for specific loans that require special attention, such as loans approaching deadlines for disclosures, funding, or rate lock commitments. “I can take a four-thousand-unit pipeline and quickly drill down and focus on the status of 200 specific units: where they originated and where they are within their lifecycle, for each regional center. It’s great to know that now I can ensure these loans are right on track.”

Translating complex reams of data into graphical information that’s easily accessed by business managers across the company is improving efficiency at Sierra Pacific Mortgage, driving the business forward with less guesswork and more certainty. “We’re making better management decisions because we can dispel assumptions and see the truth,” concludes Connell. “The faster we can measure a business process using reliable data, the faster we can decide what adjustments need to be made to help customers get the keys to their house. Providing this level of service will boost our competitive advantage. That’s the legacy of our Microsoft Azure-based BI solution.”

[Explore and learn more about Microsoft Power BI Embedded.](#)



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