

Data monitoring: JetSuite charts revenue stream

By **Michael Dempsey**

Executive jets exude glamour. They also burn dollars in crew salaries and fuel costs, not to mention flight schedules that often see them travelling between private charter jobs with no paying passengers.

Operating such jets at a profit is a big challenge.

However, one company, JetSuite, which flies across the US from its Californian home, thinks it has found the way to maximise private jet operations' profits through an internet booking system that fills planes on the empty leg between formal charters.

The company's main commitment is to its 600 registered regular customers, who account for 70 per cent of flights, as well as journeys that are booked by brokers or bargain-seeking online passengers.

Anyone can log on to the JetSuite site, and if they spot an aircraft that is due to fly empty between two locations, they can book it for as little as \$536 for a trip in a four-seat Embraer Phenom 100.

While enjoying a few hours of private-flyer status for a party of four at bargain rates may sound fun, the company is deadly serious about making every flight made by its 20-strong fleet pay.

Keith Rabin, the company's president and chief financial officer, comes from a business consulting background and is

determined to maximise the company's revenue.

Graphs and bar charts loom large in Mr Rabin's working day. They usually arrive on 60-inch wall-mounted screens connected to Apple TV boxes that are streaming digital signals around JetSuite's offices.

The various bits of information Mr Rabin sees are generated by a data dashboard from Seattle-based Tableau, a data analysis software provider.

Originally, this discipline – also known as business intelligence – was the domain of sprawling specialist companies whose products had to be managed by dedicated staff.

But the rise of online software available on subscription has meant that smaller, more user-friendly programs can put dashboards containing simple visual indicators of complex data feeds in front of a wider audience.

JetSuite has an IT office with three staff and Mr Rabin says the move to easy-to-use subscription software meant “we didn't hire more IT people to get the dashboards working. Instead, we asked more of the software”.

The way in which a dashboard represents information is largely up to the user. Most offer the option of traffic lights – red, amber and green – to show quickly where critical action

may be necessary. For Mr Rabin the graphs and bar charts are “the way we like it”, but this is a personal choice.

The big idea is to get away from bewildering data sets buried in spreadsheets and allow users to have an instant view of where the business is heading.

JetSuite's goal is to maximise the utilisation of its aircraft. That means giving different management teams an accurate data snapshot of their own line of work.

Mr Rabin is concerned with the revenue-earning flight hours each aircraft clocks up during a day. Tableau can also generate a picture of each plane's prospective revenue as charters and informal online bookings flow in and are assimilated by the software behind the dashboard.

However, for the dashboard really to deliver the goods, it has been extended across the whole company and used differently within each operating division, even though JetSuite has just 170 employees.

“We need a different dashboard for each group,” says Mr Rabin. “One dashboard for the entire company is fool's gold.”

Mr Rabin's vision might make the chief executives of much larger businesses think hard about the wisdom of having all their crucial data flowing into one

presentational screen.

“I want each manager to talk to his team about what they want to see on their dashboard,” Mr Rabin says.

He does not think of himself as “an IT person” but nonetheless he enthuses about how simple the dashboard is compared with Excel spreadsheets.

“It's a much more drag-and-drop style than Excel. You can throw data around and visualise it in different ways. The clarity really is beautiful.”

He says the JetSuite ethos is “operational awareness”, but stresses that many factors, such as the conversion rate of phone queries to charter deals, feed into whether the jets will find passengers for “empty legs”.

“The dashboard won't increase profitable flying hours by itself, but it can give each employee the data that will make them more effective in their day-to-day job.”

The company plans to add longer-range jets to its fleet and this ambition means IT tools must mirror the needs of busy staff.

“Our managers don't want to spend weeks creating a report out of software products; they need to be able to go to the dashboard and see what they need immediately.”