



Axiom Eases Budgeting Challenges, Increases Data Transparency for Valley Strong Credit Union

In the early days, Valley Strong Credit Union (previously Kern Schools Federal Credit Union) had 141 members and \$1,300 in assets — so budgeting wasn't very complex. As the credit union grew from its 1938 origins in the basement at Bakersfield High School, however, budgeting was performed manually, then later still in Excel spreadsheets.

Today, Valley Strong Credit Union in Bakersfield, Calif., serves 150,000 members with 15 branches and boasts \$2.1 billion in assets, cementing its place as the largest member-owned financial institution in the county.

As part of a core conversion in 2014, the credit union moved from Excel-based budgeting and reporting to their core provider's budgeting solution. "We hoped that was going to be a good solution for us for bottom-up budgeting. It wasn't," says Lindsay Reyes, Senior Vice President, Chief Financial Officer. "It was difficult for end users, and it took a lot of time for our IT team to troubleshoot." Additionally, the two-person finance team had to serve as administrators on two pieces of software to do their budgeting.

Two years later, the credit union adopted Axiom™ Planning, a cloud-based budgeting solution that has exceeded expectations. The solution has eased budgeting processes from start to finish. Data is much easier to



roll up into reports, and Reyes says users appreciate the intuitive interface that has brought new transparency and accountability into reporting.

"Axiom resolved so many of our issues," Reyes says. "It allowed us to do bottom-up budgeting in a way that was extremely easy for our end users to learn. In terms of IT, it was no question that we wanted to have a cloud-based solution. The Axiom implementation team was great — they answered every question that our IT team had, so they were very comfortable with the cloud-based solution."

"Axiom resolved so many of our issues. It allowed us to do bottom-up budgeting in a way that was extremely easy for our end users to learn."

Lindsay Reyes,
Senior Vice President, Chief Financial Officer



Faster compiling of budgets



Time savings from compiling and running monthly variance reports



Intuitive interface speeds learning

Improved workflows for budgeting, capital, and salary planning

Axiom has given Valley Strong unprecedented insight into operational processes across the credit union, including capital planning and salary planning.

Reyes is responsible for pulling together the final topline budget, a process that took her as many as six days to complete previously. But with Axiom, it only takes two days.

The amount of time the staff needs to input their data has been cut in half to 1.5 weeks.

"Because they're familiar with the process and they know budget season's coming, staff will go in and download their budget files from the year prior and start making adjustments," Reyes says. "Once we open the budget for the current year, they just copy in what they've already been working on. It saves them a lot of time. It saves us all a lot of time."

For capital projects, users input proposed spending based on wish lists, then administrators can evaluate those lists, approving items and altering or deleting others. "Axiom has improved transparency with capital items and made that communication between us, the finance team, and end users a lot easier," Reyes says. New reports include a detailed capital expense budget and a comparison of budgeted non-interest income and expense year-over-year.

"The salary planning module contains greater detail than the previous system, helping managers allocate staff more efficiently," Reyes says. Managers can look at individual employees, transfers, and retirements; they can also add employees, budget for overtime, and perform other key functions. Salary reports roll up to the board, improving insight into the underlying staffing assumptions and providing access to a report the credit union couldn't have created before Axiom.

Using the functionality in Axiom, finance staff pull 15-17 reports for the board that formerly had to be compiled manually each month.

"Because everything's linked, if we change something with our account structure or if we change the way our income statement looks, perhaps – it pretty much updates on the fly, which is also really helpful," Reyes says. "We don't have to go in and manually adjust all of that."

Efficiencies in reporting, including variances

Axiom enables robust data management that gives staff the power to input their own data and run their own reports. "That's especially useful to senior management," Reyes says, "because several departments and divisions roll up to each manager."

"Without having to reach out to us, executives can pull a report for an individual department, a division, or look at the impact of those as a whole," Reyes says. "That's extremely helpful, and we've gained efficiencies because finance used to spend a massive amount of time pulling reports for people before Axiom."

Variance reporting has also become easier since the Axiom adoption. Finance has created several custom reports that allow managers to examine expenses and income statements year-over-year, which gives them a starting point.

“Because everything's linked, if we change something with our account structure or if we change the way our income statement looks, perhaps – it pretty much updates on the fly, which is also really helpful.”

Lindsay Reyes,
Senior Vice President, Chief Financial Officer

"They're able to get in and see exactly what was budgeted and where. And they can see the note on why their manager put the budget there, which has helped answer questions," says Reyes. "They can't control the utilities. They can't control the rent. But they can control their supply ordering. They can control how they staff their branches. It gives them a little bit more visibility as to what we expect it to be, and it helps them with their decision-making."

Easy to use for staff and administrators

Staff buy-in is critical to successful adoption of new software, and Reyes admits that poor user experience with the prior software tainted initial perceptions of Axiom. But when Reyes explained that Axiom looks and feel like Excel, but with better ways to input and view data, perceptions quickly changed.

"The way we described it to them is that it's basically just another tab on your Excel ribbon," Reyes says. "And as long as you know how to use all of the other tabs in Excel, we'll teach you how to use this new tab and you're going to know how to do 75% of what you need to do in Axiom."

Minimal training was required to bring users up to speed, and finance staff spent very little time on training, putting screenshots together to guide users through the process.

She also appreciates the administrative functions and roles-based permissions that keep documents secure. When a user has an issue, Reyes can log in as that person to see the issue for herself, administer a fix, then log back in to make sure it's resolved.

"Since implementing Axiom, we've gone through a core conversion, a phone system conversion, an online banking conversion, a mobile conversion, and a credit card conversion," Reyes says. "Our IT team has been more than busy with everything else they have on their plate, so it's extremely helpful that there is very little support needed from our own IT team. And then the few times we have had to reach out, they were able to call Syntellis and get it resolved so quickly."