

Abenaki Analytics Went the No-Code Route for Building Their Athena College Tool to Help Higher Education Management

The Challenge

Abenaki Analytics provides consulting services and software solutions for higher education. They have decades of experience under their belt in advising higher education institutions. Steve Shulman is the Principal of Abenaki Analytics, and he helped numerous colleges and universities improve their processes and educate their management teams.

Athena College is their latest project in development, and it is an integrated financial and strategic planning simulation designed for educational purposes.

“Throughout the time I have spent in higher education, one of the most striking observation is that the universities and colleges comprised of disparate groups of stakeholders. People who have a very keen interest in what is happening have their own perspective on the world. As a university administrator, my perspective was the entirety of the institution, and bringing people together to focus in on the complexity of administering a university, the cause-and-effect relationships. So the things that happen on the left side affect the right side. This seemed to me like an exercise that would be helpful to get people more attuned to what it takes to manage a university or college in a way that is strategically sound and sustainable over time. This application was designed as an educational tool for that purpose.” Says Steve about why this new project is necessary in helping higher education institutions achieve their goals in the long term.

Steve is the mastermind behind the Athena College tool, and he built it using his go-to platform for conceptualizing an algorithm: Microsoft Excel. He knows the ins-and-outs of spreadsheets, and has been using it in every aspect of his business. In his own words: *“I built this tool in Excel because that is the medium I know and am comfortable*

with. This is not my first software development project. I found it effective to put my ideas together in a way that would display the objective of the application well. But I am not a technical person and I do not write code. So, I built my tools in Excel and then share it with a developer. This way, they have an actual working blueprint of what it is I am trying to accomplish”.

Steve has been through the process of building web applications before, but this time it was different – much easier than working with developers, and cost-effective. Steve also adds: *“I have done a full-scale development process for a very sophisticated, cutting-edge SaaS application in the past. The initial launch took 9 months, and a lot of money. Fortunately, it was successful. I knew it would be because I was taking a very complex Excel solution, that had worked for 10 years in my consulting practice, and I put it on the web in a sophisticated fashion”.*

He is no stranger to developing software tools, and has done numerous projects before by hiring developers and building custom solutions. However, Excel is his preferred platform for fleshing out the details of his projects. So, he already had a head-start here. All he needed to do at this point was to “convert” it into a web application.

The Solution

Creating another custom solution for the Athena College application was Steve’s first instinct, because he already had experience with this. However, this would mean a very lengthy and costly development process. Since the Athena College application was still essentially a proof of concept, Steve did not want to go all-in on custom coding. He explains: *“I approached the developer that I used in my last project – which was related, but not related to this one – and basically, they gave me a proposal for a full-blown*

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application, using cutting edge technology, along the lines with what I had done before with them. However, I was not ready for that this time, because this is an unproven product. Last time I invested heavily, because I had a consulting practice and I knew that the application would serve the purpose well, and I was willing to make that investment.

But, with this project, I do not know if there is a market yet. I did not want to go through all that trouble and expense to test-market a new idea. I could have gotten this application custom coded, and if it did not fly, I would be out a substantial amount of money”.

It did not make sense to spend tens of thousands of dollars in this application yet. Steve then found that he could capitalize on his own knowledge of Excel using SpreadsheetWeb and convert his workbook into a web application within days, not months. The calculation logic comes from the underlying workbook he had already built, and no coding knowledge was necessary to publish it on the web.

The Results

Abenaki Analytics was able to convert the Athena College tool into a web application very rapidly and was able to keep their costs very low. The application pulls the calculation logic and the data from the workbook Steve had built originally.

“It was the website and testimonials that they have from their other clients that made me choose SpreadsheetWeb at the end of the day – with an emphasis on customer service. Not being a technical person, that is extremely important. It has proven to be a well-deserved reputation, quite frankly, in the short time we have been working together.” Says Steve regarding his experience with the SpreadsheetWeb team.

With additional features like the ability to save data, create and manage users, and define user roles to allow limited access in the system, Athena College tool can now be utilized by faculty and students as a collaborative environment. Users can share notes and compare their data, all behind a secure platform.

Very pleased with the results, Steve describes the outcome: *“It was incredibly easy to convert the tool into a web application. The process was smooth beyond my expectation. I had a working application in the matter of a couple of days. It just blew me away. If I went with my original developer from my last product, it would have been in the range of tens of thousands of dollars to build the application”* And he continues, *“I took a gamble based upon the SpreadsheetWeb website, and my conversation with their support team, and I honestly could not be more pleased with what has happened in a very short amount of time. It has given me huge confidence in my ability to test-market this. I am also gradually learning how to configure some of the details, and all of this happened in less than two weeks. It is really remarkable. SpreadsheetWeb was a godsend.”*

Abenaki Analytics purchased a public cloud license and keep all their data in the cloud. The Athena College application is now accessible from any device with a web browser, and the application can be controlled from a single source – all with zero coding.

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