

Straight Talking – BI to go mainstream?

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The ultimate goal of business intelligence is to drive better business performance through providing the right data at the right time. However, implementing a business intelligence (BI) platform can be costly and complex to use and deploy. Traditional BI solutions are often only used by a small proportion of users - the analysts and power users - and even then, the tools can be difficult to use.

With Office 2007, Microsoft aims to address the unrealised potential use of BI in an organisation by applying its low-cost, high-volume approach to the market. But whilst Microsoft may indeed increase the awareness of BI tools, achieving mainstream BI adoption still faces many challenges.

One of the main drivers for BI adoption is the need to analyse high volumes of transactional data, which continue to grow exponentially. This is supplemented by the requirement to analyse business performance through financial results, sales results and key performance indicators (KPIs).

In response to a fast-changing environment, businesses must be able to react quickly to capitalise on new opportunities, which places a premium on the ability to understand and analyse data. For BI to have an impact on business decisions, it must provide information directly to the desktops of a wide range of operational users so that they can react in real time and make immediate decisions.

However there are numerous factors which are compromising the true fulfilment of BI on every desktop. Generally a BI platform architecture can be complex to build and inflexible to change as business processes change. As a result, many BI deployments not only take a long time to implement but also are often limited to specific functional areas of the business, such as finance, rather than the whole business.

Also, many BI applications are far from easy to learn and use, requiring specialist users and training - again limiting the broader use of BI. In

addition, platform limitations exist due to many data warehouses and data marts which are based on aggregated data. This means that any data analysis is limited to predefined cubes which may not reflect the business process today, and multiple data warehouses also ultimately hinders the view of a 'single version of truth'.

These factors have all played a part in limiting the full distribution of enterprise-wide business intelligence. All too often, many organisations deploying BI choose to deploy a pilot approach and the implementation never extends beyond this. BI vendors, on the other hand, are all vying to bring BI mainstream through their vision of query, reporting and dashboards on every desktop. Indeed, organisations require a standardised platform to work across their business, not just at a departmental level.

So what are the BI vendors doing to address the requirement for standardisation?

Leading BI vendors such as Business Objects, Cognos and Hyperion are investing significant resources into re-architecting their original disparate tools and applications to work together as part of an integrated platform: for example, Business Objects XI, Cognos 8 and Hyperion System 9.

Commonly based on the new service-oriented architectures, these suites are focused on driving BI standardisation across the enterprise by integrating OLAP (On Line Analytical Processing), query and reporting, dashboards and also data integration. SAS now offers analytics directly aimed at non-technical users through WebReport Studio, and is seeing strong growth in sales of its Enterprise BI Server Platform.

At the enterprise level both SAP and Oracle are positioning their respective NetWeaver and Fusion Middleware application integration platforms as linking BI to overall business processes. In addition, SAP's 'Duet' with Microsoft also promises to tie NetWeaver BI and analytic data to the Microsoft Office desktop,

within the comfort zone of most business users today.

A notable development in the BI market is the release of Microsoft Office 2007 which has the potential to bring BI capabilities to the desktop of all Office users (which is over 90 per cent of information workers). Microsoft is also fundamentally positioning SQL Server 2005's latest data integration, OLAP, reporting capabilities and data integration tools on an equal footing with other best-of-breed BI tools. By offering features that enable organisations to pilot low-cost, low-commitment BI initiatives Microsoft believes that Office 2007 will be the key vehicle to distributing analytics to a much broader audience than before.

Microsoft's BI strategy also extends to combining Office 2007 with SharePoint which will form the basis of a federated portal providing wide-ranging data access. However, whilst sales of Office 2007 to a vast Office base will boost sales of SQL Server 2005 and raise awareness of Microsoft's BI, it will be Microsoft's route to market, cost and desktop dominance which will determine if Office succeeds in forming the basis of a company's enterprise-wide BI strategy.

Perhaps the most significant activity around driving BI to a wider audience is the integration with enterprise search. Business Objects is offering new search capabilities that will make it easier for users to retrieve information using keyword searches from its business intelligence tools, including Crystal Reports, Web Intelligence Reports and DashBoard Manager. Cognos has also launched Go!, which offers enterprise search capabilities and is aimed at targeting a more diverse user base.

BI vendors are working on applications which not only search existing reports but also build reports on the fly. Whilst this may open BI to analysis beyond the standard querying of databases, effective enterprise BI search will ultimately rely on a robust metadata framework.

Nevertheless, with the requirement for faster business insight, enterprise search certainly promises to offer easier access to both structured and unstructured information, and therefore drive BI deeper into an organisation.

Without doubt Microsoft has the potential to increase broader awareness of BI with its Office 2007 capabilities. However the investment for organisations to standardise on Microsoft for enterprise BI is hugely dependent on their existing infrastructure - and although Microsoft BI capabilities may be highly price-competitive, there will still be costs in terms of migration.

Pure-play BI vendors may not feel an immediate impact, although they are already being squeezed by Oracle and SAP and feeling the pressure from smaller, innovative vendors such as Spotfire, Tableau and QlikTech that focus on lower total cost of ownership, visualisation and in-memory analysis. In all, this vendor activity is all positive for the BI market and should help the market evolve from its tactical roots to becoming more pervasive and strategic.

In such a crowded market, the key factors which will ultimately drive wider adoption are architecture and integration, with the aim to enable users to explore data in their own way. This self-serve functionality will enable broader use of BI but this can only happen if end users can easily learn, deploy and effectively manage a BI application without a dependency on IT. Only when BI solutions are broadly distributed to all users who need access to information, will the dashboard on every desktop become a reality.

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Quocirca's primary research involves the surveying of many thousands of technical and business end users each quarter, analyzing their perceptions of the possible impact of emerging, evolving and maturing technologies on their businesses.