

BI and the Need for Speed

By Don Arendarczyk

In the burgeoning world of big data and business intelligence, the whispers are getting louder. Business users are questioning the lofty claims made by BI vendors, analysts, consultants and others with increased suspicion.

And from a purely common sense perspective, they're absolutely right to be skeptical. It's mid-2013, and by far the biggest frustration for organizations is the length of time it takes to achieve a return on their BI investment.

The data's out there, faster technologies currently exist, and BI expertise is readily available. A perfect storm, if you will. So why does it still take so long — six months to a year or more in some instances — to go from BI project inception to actionable results? It's time to execute more common-sense, inexpensive approaches using results-oriented practices that quickly provide measurable results to doubtful business users, before they invest in costly large-scale endeavors based purely on faith.

Speedy ROI is the Goal

It's more than reasonable for business users to demand evidence that the products and services they've been proposed will reap the intended benefits. Asking the obvious, "Why does it take so long?" exposes flawed practices in need of improvement. Businesses are currently grappling with how to gain faster returns on their BI investments while shedding unnecessary obstacles along the way. These logjams can include frequent peer reviews, myriad signoffs, competing departmental agendas and expensive hardware upgrades, among other issues.

Recently, one consumer-packaged goods conglomerate addressed these problems in a challenge to prospective BI vendor and consulting teams. Its goal was to kick-start a business intelligence initiative using a more streamlined approach with easier-to-execute, more transparent steps. Its top priority was speedy ROI without any interference or involvement from internal departments that had no discernible impact on the process.



One can salute this firm's assertive realignment of its thinking and its priorities as a typical example of the corporate dynamic behind rapid enablement — not allowing obstructions like rigid policies, internal company politics or complacency to interfere with what's in the best interest of an organization as a whole. True progress generally occurs when we take a good hard look at what we're doing and question past practices, hierarchies and alliances. The key to success is in preserving what we know works while having the courage to throw out outdated, cumbersome methodologies that serve an inflexible system rather than best serving our needs and goals.

Innovative Options that Deliver Results Fast

The good news is that organizations like the CPG example can take advantage of more effective BI development approaches that have emerged out of the chaos; those that resonate well in 2013 and strategies that offer swifter deployments and quantifiable results without wasting excess time, energy and resources. The following are some of the more innovative, sensible guidelines that prove a business case while providing a much better bang for the buck:

- The rapid enablement movement. This is the overriding guiding principle, in which the BI development strategy focuses on enabling the business community to see results fast, often using the cloud. The goal is to quickly realize value within specific, targeted business use cases, whether in marketing, supply chain or sales analytics, for example, while a larger scale implementation is underway, and then migrating back into the completed system when it's ready.
 - The proof of concept strategy. Get a jump on BI projects using the cloud for proof-of-concept exercises to gain insights now, demonstrating value early to executives with limited investment and risk in order to gain buy-in for a more robust/costly program in future phases. Lessons learned in these proof of concept endeavors drive future activities and approaches.
 - Take the cloud to the limit. While a small number of IT departments might still view cloud services providers as poachers on their territory, more and more forward-thinking CIOs and their organizations are looking to the cloud for speed and ease of use. In today's competitive world, speed-to-market is critical. With a cloud BI platform, firms can be up and running in weeks, not months or years. Firms also recognize the value and savings involved in using a cloud service provider as a lower cost, pay as you go alternative. This makes buy-in easier, as there are no long-term leases or expenditures for costly hardware and software.
1. Use the cloud as a central hub for enterprise data storage, retrieval and data migrations. More firms want to build a foundational data infrastructure, integrating data silos with both existing data (sales, CRM, supply chain, etc.) and emerging (unstructured) data. With the cloud, new hardware isn't required.
 2. Take advantage of the cloud as a secure conduit for gathering applicable unstructured and semi-structured data for future marketing, social media and customer relations BI applications.
 3. Use the cloud to allow user groups the ability to work independently from IT. With turnkey cloud analytics platforms, all you need is an internet connection.
 4. Use the cloud as your master data management hub. Data governance and MDM are big concerns right now. Business groups within organizations working without standards and oversight lead to non-standard and inaccurate data. To solve this issue, use an application that can be hosted in the cloud, making setup and roll-out much faster and easier.
- Adopt the agile approach. Embracing change is the basic tenet of agile, a radical departure from more traditional project development methodologies. Agile stresses the following: 1) individuals and interactions over processes/ tools to promote better communication and faster results; 2) actual working software over time-wasting exercises disguised as work, including excessive documentation, gratuitous approvals and pointless status meetings; 3) active customer collaboration over contract negotiations, building and showing customers the software, rather than dictating to them what the software will look like or how it will perform; and 4) responding to change effectively over adhering to set plans that may not ultimately reflect what the customer wants or needs.
 - "Preconfigured" prototype or accelerator products. Take advantage of low-cost, prebuilt analytics and associated dashboards hosted in the cloud that provide fast analytic results to executive leadership. Accelerators are designed as building blocks ready for expansion to achieve enhanced reporting, analytics and predictive analytics capability.
- In the past, working through these strategies and implementations would require months of time, manpower, documentation and wrangling on the changing role of IT departments. Some of our own clients complain, "Do we really need IT?" Some clients want to own and manage their entire BI reporting and analytics function without any need for IT staff to get involved as in the case of our CPG conglomerate example. While this scenario is not for everyone, it's becoming more common for organizations to express interest in this approach.

A Changing Role for IT

Another reality that our consulting clients have realized for some time is that the role of the corporate IT department is also evolving toward a more streamlined, smaller operation. In CIO magazine's Oct. 2, 2012 issue, "The Incredible Shrinking IT Department: How Skill Changes and Relationship Management are Reducing Head Count in Many IT Departments," author Brad Howarth highlights some of the challenges COOs and CIOs face in keeping IT departments relevant in our current business climate. In many cases, client management views their IT departments as bottlenecks to implementing BI processes more quickly. In the article, Howarth's interview subject, CIO Vito Forte from Fortescue Metals Group, seems to agree, stating, "We've had to make sure we can help the organisation grow, without being a barrier ... As a team, our focus is on trying to look at all of the

things that we shouldn't be doing anymore, and what can be done through some of these newer-style services that deliver better value, are more flexible and have better commercial outcomes." Noting the cloud's growing role in business, Forte adds, "As the maturity of the cloud market in all its various forms increases, the need to do the stuff that we were doing a year or two years ago is now starting to diminish... We need to stay relevant, effective and efficient because our competition is no longer outsourcers, but cloud services."

Beware the Snake Oil Salesman

It's human nature to want to get in on what's popular, and big data, with all the business intelligence benefits it encompasses, is still trending way up. But, beware the snake oil salesman, and don't get conned into buying what you don't need. What we as BI professionals want to encourage

is focusing on the innovative approaches outlined above that actually work and solve the need for faster solutions in today's digital age.

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