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Business intelligence and the mainframe: Getting the best bang for your BI buck

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Some might remember that back in the 1990s, besides Dolly the sheep being cloned and the Hubble Space Telescope launching into orbit, enterprises moved away from the mainframe to distributed platforms. Businesses had grown weary of mainframe issues such as application backlogs, control and cost. Yet, in the past decade, the tables have turned. Many of these same companies look back longingly at the mainframe as they face even larger application backlogs and spiraling costs compounded by issues of quality, control, complexity, availability and security. And for good reason. The mainframe is recognized in today's industry as a powerful workhorse with compelling strengths, such as operational efficiency, total cost of ownership advantages and its ability to "green up" your data center.

Accessing your data where it lives

A key driver of this mainframe movement is the need to establish a "single version of the truth" of corporate data. This is key to fostering alignment across the organization as well as ensuring compliance. That's a difficult task to accomplish when crucial data can be in many forms, and in many locations across the company in a distributed computing environment. So it is easy to understand the value of the mainframe and the recent paradigm shift. With a direct line to your corporate data readily available in one place on your mainframe, you'd like to be able to better utilize that data to enable more users to make better, faster business decisions aligned with strategic initiatives. So you turn to business intelligence (BI) tools for critical, day-to-day business insight.

According to a recent analyst report, IT spending surpassed \$7.3 trillion in 2007. Yet, here are some interesting facts from a major consulting firm about the poor return on investment many companies are seeing on their so-called information assets, at a time when good information seems to be painfully hard to come by and even harder to use:

- Managers waste two hours per day searching for information.
- More than 50 percent of managers use the wrong information at least once a week.
- More than 50 percent of the information that managers receive is perceived as having no value.

Using your data for what it's really worth

So how is it that smart companies, and especially those determined to leverage the value of their mainframes, aren't able to translate information into competitive advantage? One reason is that many users simply don't know where to find information they can trust. They need help finding and filtering information. Those who do find it don't know how to apply it to key decisions.

A second reason relates to the resurgence of mainframes. Business intelligence and analytics play a key role in most enterprise accounts today and are often instrumental in providing mission-critical data. However, the "modern" BI vendors haven't been spending time developing applications that run on the mainframe where the majority of the data resides. The data most often is offloaded to another platform which takes time, extra resources, and forces the user to always look at data in hindsight. These vendors primarily target upper management, executives, and power users.

Historically, corporations have made tactical purchasing decisions. Many have invested in BI software from multiple suppliers, with each application serving the needs of a particular department and a fraction of the potential user population, often the seasoned business analysts. A better approach is to establish a BI strategy that enables wider adoption of BI among general line-of-business users — across the organization — using a single robust tool to support that strategy.

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More users. Better decisions. Faster.

Do you want most of your organization to be passive recipients of “interesting” information? Or, the alternative, which is employees who are active participants in leveraging actionable information? The result is that they can better understand your business and respond swiftly to opportunities and challenges, to change your business for the better.

The fact is that directing one good piece of information to the right person at the right time can alter the way you do business. For example, let’s say that timely and key competitive information about go-to-market product details gets to you the moment before you announce your own product strategy, or, worse yet, after you drop bundles of money in the center of a certain product roadmap. If you had the ability to intelligently scour or receive alerts on massive volumes of data, you would have been empowered with intelligence on your business, the market, your customers and the competition. When it comes to any day-to-day decision-making, you can use BI every second of every day and so can everyone in your organization, no matter where they are located.

The premier solution for effective BI is a proven platform with deep, real-time analysis and broad reporting capabilities, along with active dashboards and actionable scorecards for high-impact business insight. With a single platform, you can roll out BI tools to a wider cross-section of employees, offering:

- *Executives* – At-a-glance views of highly summarized information with direct relevance to their key initiatives, plus the power to react quickly based on data and markets that continually change.
- *Business managers* – Fast access to critical high-level and detailed information to make better operational decisions and boost profitability.
- *Financial and business analysts* – The freedom to explore and analyze data from every data source and create sophisticated, statement-style reports with ease.
- *Employees* – Scheduled, personalized content specific to their role, or, for example, customer information that’s readily accessible when in the middle of a customer call.
- *Customers and partners* – Secure access to information over the Web without the need for training.

A single, open, enterprise-class BI platform that offers broad BI functionality can solve many of the problems companies face today with inconsistencies in data, and especially how employees access and use that data for the greatest advantage.

Delivering on the full promise of BI

IBM knows information: Where to store it, how to manage it, the best ways to retrieve it and what to do with it when you get it. As a powerhouse in storing and delivering information, IBM recently launched the new System z10 mainframe — its enterprise-class edition mainframe designed to dramatically increase efficiency for enterprise data centers. And to accelerate its Information on Demand strategy, IBM recently completed the acquisition of Cognos, an industry leader and provider of BI and performance management technology and services.

With System z10 and this acquisition, IBM released a new suite of Information on Demand software for System z, which includes IBM Cognos 8 Business Intelligence for System z. Now you can have the proven reporting and analysis capabilities of IBM Cognos 8 BI with the power and reliability of System z — including System z10. You’ll be able to use your data for competitive advantage, improve your decision-making and optimize your business performance.

IBM also recently announced its IBM DB2 for z/OS Value Unit Edition (VUE) server. This is a new packaging option of DB2 on a one-time charge basis. DB2 VUE is available for DB2 version 8 and 9 of DB2 9 for z/OS. It enables the cost-effective deployment of new application workloads on the System z platform, and provides an alternative acquisition model compared to IBM’s standard MLC (monthly license charge) format. With DB2 for z/OS VUE you can enhance the role of System z in key business initiatives, such as Service Oriented Architecture, Web-based applications, pureXML, data warehousing, operational BI and commercial applications.

Conclusion

Though the market is playing catch-up with developing BI tools that serve the mainframe, leading BI vendors are already delivering them. For many companies, however, there is a lot that can be done now to leverage the value of the mainframe in their BI initiatives. Business executives who set strategic goals for the organization are typically surrounded by employees who aren't able to effectively align their efforts with those goals because they don't have access to the same information as those at the top. Access to factual, comprehensive data — and one version of that data — is vital for everyone in your organization faced with daily decisions that impact your business.

Many companies are rethinking their BI strategy. By reducing the number of BI tools to a single, powerful BI platform and engaging a broader population of users, companies can extend BI capabilities to the entire organization. This extends decision-making to levels beyond the strategic planners and executives. It provides an enterprise approach to BI. Everyone can become a decision-maker — and you can get the best bang for your BI buck.

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