

BW, BI, BO: The ABC of Business Intelligence?

Introduction

The business intelligence market is consolidating. SAP AG, already a big player in this field, has reinforced its presence by taking over various companies in the segment, such as OutlookSoft and, more recently, Business Objects. The SAP Business Intelligence customer is thus faced with a widening and sometimes redundant offering of products, with confusingly changing names: the traditional platform SAP BW, which had already been renamed in SAP BI 7.0, is now called SAP NetWeaver BW, whereas SAP BI now designates the combination of the SAP Netweaver BW platform and SAP Business Objects tools.

SAP has recently published a roadmap explaining the evolution of its Business Intelligence offering (1), particularly centering on the front-end tools. The objective of the present article is to comment some essential elements of the roadmap, adopting a technical perspective and considering the point of view of customers already operating a SAP NetWeaver BW platform. The issue of integration and the various tools are also discussed.

Integration of the SAP Business Objects and SAP NetWeaver BW platforms

The SAP Business Intelligence roadmap outlines the advantages the SAP Business Objects platform offers. It emphasizes the tools' thorough coverage of business intelligence needs, their openness to other platforms, and their ease of use and powerful rendering functionality for analysis, reporting and dashboard purposes. Everybody will agree to these statements. While these arguments focus on functionality, the aspects of the integration between the SAP Business Objects and SAP NetWeaver BW platforms and the overlap of some tools must also be considered, on at least 3 counts.

Firstly, by mentioning the tight integration of the SAP Business Objects and SAP NetWeaver BW platforms, the roadmap implicitly acknowledges the coexistence of two distinct platforms. Indeed, we are talking about two sets of business intelligence tools, integrated over the BAPI and Web Service technologies, with all their limits – technical constraints, performance, security, etc.

Similarly, the integration of SAP Business Objects into the SAP EP portal remains an open issue, and is not handled in the roadmap. When evaluating the SAP Business Objects products, the customers operating a SAP EP infrastructure will have to consider the protection of their investments in existing portal systems.

Secondly, the coexistence of two platforms implies additional technical maintenance and tuning work on the hardware and software sides, and auxiliary activities such as ensuring security and maintaining access rights.

Thirdly, costs remain an issue, and it should be clear that the SAP Business Objects is a premium offering, subject to additional licence rights compared to the standard SAP NetWeaver BW product palette. The customer must thus carefully balance the products' value add and their additional licence costs.

The integration between the two platforms thus does seem to be complete yet. The new release, announced for 2010, should bring substantial improvement in this regard.

We will now go on with the roadmap analysis, and detail the four functionality groups supported by the SAP Business Objects and SAP NetWeaver BW tools.

Visualization and Dashboards

For this first functionality group, SAP Business Objects' Xcelsius is facing the Web Application Designer. There is no doubt here that the former product is a much more powerful and user-friendly alternative to implementing dashboards. Moreover, existing BEx queries can be reused in dashboard designed with Xcelsius, over BAPI and Web Services. Reusability is insured, within the limits already mentioned above. However, the issue of the SAP Enterprise Portal integration must be raised again here. At any count, existing customers will appreciate SAP's assurance that the Web Application Designer will continue to be supported.

Enterprise Reporting

For this second group, Crystal Report is confronted to the BEx Report Designer. The latter product did not have the expected success; SAP will still support it, but is providing a transition to Crystal Report, which thus seems to become the reference product. For the customers who do not want to purchase the premium suite, SAP is offering a limited version of the product, called "Crystal Report for SAP NetWeaver BW" and planned for 2010.

Ad hoc Query and Reporting

The SAP Business Object suite is alone covering this functionality group, with its Web Intelligence product, allowing business analysts to quickly and easily analyze data, whatever the source. From an end-user point of view, this is a tempting proposition. For the system administrators, the technical impact of ad hoc queries accessing data must be considered, and rules enforced. We are facing here the old choice between dedicated databases – and the resulting data redundancy and development work – and direct access to source tables – and its impact on system performance and security. Despite technical advances in the domain, this functionality remains problematic in terms of system administration.

OLAP Analysis

In this functionality group, the SAP BEx Analyzer faces the Voyager product. Here, in terms of functionality, ease of use and power, the SAP Business Object offering are far superior, in spite of the improvement SAP recently brought to the BEx Analyzer. Voyager's mobile features add the finishing touch. In this context, the customers are left with a difficult question: are the Premium features worth the additional licence costs? It is not possible here to give a definitive answer to the question; each situation must be analyzed separately.

The decision will not be any easier in the future, as SAP is promising to provide a product combining the best of two worlds with its Pioneer project: tight integration with the SAP NetWeaver BW backend components and the power of SAP Business Objects tools in one platform. This is good news, but the new product will still be part of the Premium offering. On any count, SAP makes an important point for existing customers by ensuring continued support for the BEx platform.

Data Warehousing

In this domain, SAP is stating again its commitment for protection of investment and innovation with SAP NetWeaver BW. A real relief for managers of SAP NetWeaver BW platforms, which remain the central back end component. An extension is proposed with the Premium SAP Business Objects Data Services, for enhanced monitoring of staging, documentation and data quality management.

SAP is also confirming the BW Accelerator as a central component for handling performance issues. However, this should not lead customers to forget the necessary tuning activities, such as partitioning, compression, design, ABAP routine quality, etc. The right expertise can help postpone the purchase of additional hardware dedicated to the BWA.

Business Content

The roadmap also addresses the Business Content provided with the SAP Business Objects offering, notably mentioning pre-defined Crystal reports and Xcelsius dashboards. The statements will be considered with a pinch of salt. In the past, customers often held varying opinions as to the quality of the Business Content delivered with previous versions of SAP NetWeaver BW. If data sources and infocubes were widely used in practice, queries were rarely considered more than mere templates, if used at all. The Business Objects Business Content may attract a similar judgement.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to its roadmap, SAP clearly states the innovation and development of the SAP Business Objects product set as a priority. The BEx tools will not be a strategic direction anymore, but SAP ensures that they will still be supported in the long term. However, SAP advises its customers to adopt the SAP Business Objects tools, for “enhanced and strategic BI needs”.

Each customer now has to critically evaluate the SAP Business Objects offering on the one hand, and on the other hand analyze the gap between his own BI needs and the functionality provided by the existing SAP NetWeaver BW platform. Reflections as to the use of the SAP Enterprise Portal should enrich the analysis, which will ultimately allow to decide on the opportunity of adopting products of the SAP Business Objects platform in a given environment.

At this time though, there is no reason for the customers to give up the efforts on their existing SAP NetWeaver BW platform. A migration path to the SAP Business Objects tools exists, but the step should be carefully reflected. Without any doubt, the decision to migrate will rest on more solid grounds with the delivery of a stable and fully functional 2010 release.

- (1) Extending the value of SAP NetWeaver with SAP BusinessObjects Intelligence Platform – Product Integration Roadmaps (February 2009; Solution Management SAP NetWeaver, Solution Marketing SAP BusinessObjects, SAP AG, Walldorf),
<http://www.sdn.sap.com/irj/scn/go/portal/prtroot/docs/library/uuid/b00a1a75-c49d-2b10-0ebb-ecc80ab88994>