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TEA for March 2010 ©

BI: SAP REVAMPS BUSINESS OBJECT SAAS BI SUITE

Abstract: Last month SAP announced a significant upgrade of its “BusinessObjects BI OnDemand” offering that both consolidates the vendor’s software-as-a-service (SaaS) offerings and presents simpler interfaces for novice business intelligence users. SAP has yet to define pricing and detail expected data integration options, but the new platform could well extend SAP’s lead in SaaS-based BI.

INTRODUCTION

Background

SaaS is a model of software deployment whereby a provider licenses an application to customers for use as a service on demand. SaaS software vendors may host the application on their own web servers or upload the application to the consumer device, disabling it after use or after the on-demand contract expires. The on-demand function may be handled internally to share licenses within a firm or by a third-party application service provider (ASP) sharing licenses between firms. In the realm of business intelligence (BI), SAP is late to the market with the result that it has had to go back and revamp its early entry attempts. Here is a look at SAP’s latest on its SaaS BI version of the licensed version of the product.

Advanced Edition

SAP says its advanced edition of ***BusinessObjects BI OnDemand***” will be aimed at companies integrating on-premise data sources and requiring advanced security and more storage (up to 5 GB). Current CrystalReports.com and BI OnDemand subscribers will be upgraded under their current contracts, and they’ll gain access to all the new tools, wizards and workflows at no additional charge.

Add-on features will include hosted, large-scale data warehouses, a development environment and single-sign-on capabilities. A small minority of SAP's current BusinessObjects BI OnDemand customers use these advanced data warehousing services. But this segment is quickly growing, according to SAP, fueled in part by partners such as Oco, a SaaS-based data warehousing vendor that offers prebuilt models and analytics for areas such as supply chain optimization and profitability analysis. Oco uses SAP BusinessObjects BI OnDemand for reporting and analysis. Joining yesterday's announcement, an Oco executive said the combination of on-premise and on-demand BI has been a boon to larger customers including Welch's (grape juice products) and Fidelity Investments.

"These companies have existing, on-premise BI technology, but we come into play when they encounter new areas where they want to get a business analytics solution quickly up and running," said Anil Chitkara, Oco's senior vice president of market development.

The Upgrade

The upgraded SAP BusinessObjects BI OnDemand unites and replaces two formerly distinct offerings: CrystalReports.com, the company's simplest and most popular SaaS offering, which has more than 200,000 subscribers; and the previously-available version of BI OnDemand, which was based on the vendor's on-premise SAP BusinessObjects XI BI suite. The new service delivers a single environment in which users can harness online versions of familiar tools, including Crystal Reports for reporting, Web Intelligence for query and analysis, Xcelsius for dashboarding and data visualization, and SAP BusinessObjects Explorer for fast, in-memory data analysis. For novice users who might not be familiar with these tools, the new service greets users with hand-holding wizards said to simplify data access and analysis.

"This new offering delivers a very intuitive, guided workflow for people of any expertise level," said Marge Brea, an executive vice president at SAP. The backbone of the service is a simple explore-report-share workflow. In the exploration phase, users can find and blend data from their own desktops and corporate sources without being an information management guru, according to the vendor.

Wizards suggest appropriate data integration steps.

Data from centralized sources can be refreshed automatically because the system relies on linked references to dynamic data rather than copies that quickly fall out of sync. In the reporting phase, users are ushered -- in business language rather than BI jargon -- to the right tool for the desired task, be it reporting, dashboarding, ad-hoc query or analysis.

In the sharing phase, new social-casting options let users publish and embed reports and data visualizations much as they would Flickr photos or YouTube videos. And the sharing options include external blogs, wikis and Web sites as well as internal blogs and

intranets. SAP executives said security settings, revocable access privileges, tracking and auditing features will ensure appropriate use of data. "People share data today, but they do it in ways that aren't tracked or controlled through cutting, pasting, exporting and emailing," said David Meyer, a senior vice president at SAP. "This is a fluid system that lets you collaborate, but you can also report on, audit and control how information is accessed and used."

POSITIONING & ANALYSIS

With more than 260,000 current subscribers to its services, SAP leads the SaaS-based BI market. Executives stressed that this puts the company in a unique position to blend the strengths of on-premise and on-demand software. Illustrating the benefit, users of on-premise Crystal Reports software have long been able to push a single button to publish reports on CrystalReports.com.

Missing from the formal announcement was news that the next major "Aurora" release of the on-premise BusinessObjects XI suite, which is expected in the second half of this year, will be loaded with similar report and data-visualization publishing options. And where today the service has simple FTP and browser-based options to upload data, coming releases promise much more. We have prior art around connectivity from our BI clients into the cloud... and over the next couple of months there will be a lot more details around APIs for pushing data into the system from any programming language or app," Meyer said. The design target, he added, is for on-premise updates on a factory floor, for example, to show up in cloud-based dashboards without human intervention.

As with any SaaS offering, key attractions include low cost and rapid deployment, SAP said. But also missing in today's announcement was detail on the pricing of the new service. A free Personal Edition will be limited to 10 megabytes or 2,000 rows of data. An Essential edition will grant up to 2 GB of storage and will be geared to individuals, work groups and departments.

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