



Oracle's Modern Analytics Platform

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About 10 years ago I was absorbed into Oracle, along with many others, through its acquisition of Siebel. Siebel's dominance in the CRM market was of course the big attraction to Oracle at the time, but let's not forget about Siebel CRM, the real jewel in the crown was Siebel Analytics!

Siebel Analytics was quickly renamed Oracle Business Intelligence Enterprise Edition (OBIEE) and became Oracle's strategic BI platform (there wasn't much competition within Oracle, to be frank). Whilst Siebel CRM eventually ended up being overtaken by other products (e.g. Oracle CX Cloud) and is essentially obsolete, OBIEE has evolved continuously and today it remains a key player in the analytics space.

Back in those Siebel days, Siebel Analytics was easily dismissed by competitors as a "CRM-only reporting tool". By simply changing its name to OBIEE, the product instantly became an "enterprise" reporting tool that was capable of supporting any industry vertical.

But for years we witnessed the same old battle over and over again. OBIEE vs Qlik. OBIEE vs Tableau, or to put it another way: "Enterprise" vs "Self-Service".

The Tableau sales people were always great at showing how quickly you can create cool visualisations ("you mean we don't need IT?"). The problem was that after 6 months of Tableau the customers would be in trouble since their "self-service" BI strategy had become the dark web.....no control, no standards, no security, no governance.

But on the other hand, nobody wants to wait 6 months for IT to deliver a report either. Deadlock.

The same competition exists even today, but the situation has changed significantly. Whilst the likes of Tableau continue to operate in one segment of the analytics market, Oracle now operates in three.

We are seeing the analytics marketplace segment into three different types of product designed to support three specific business needs or functions:

- Enterprise e.g. HR Manager
- Self-Service e.g. HR Analyst
- Search e.g. HR Operations

Figure 1 opposite is a graphic that outlines the high-level differences in each of the three segments:

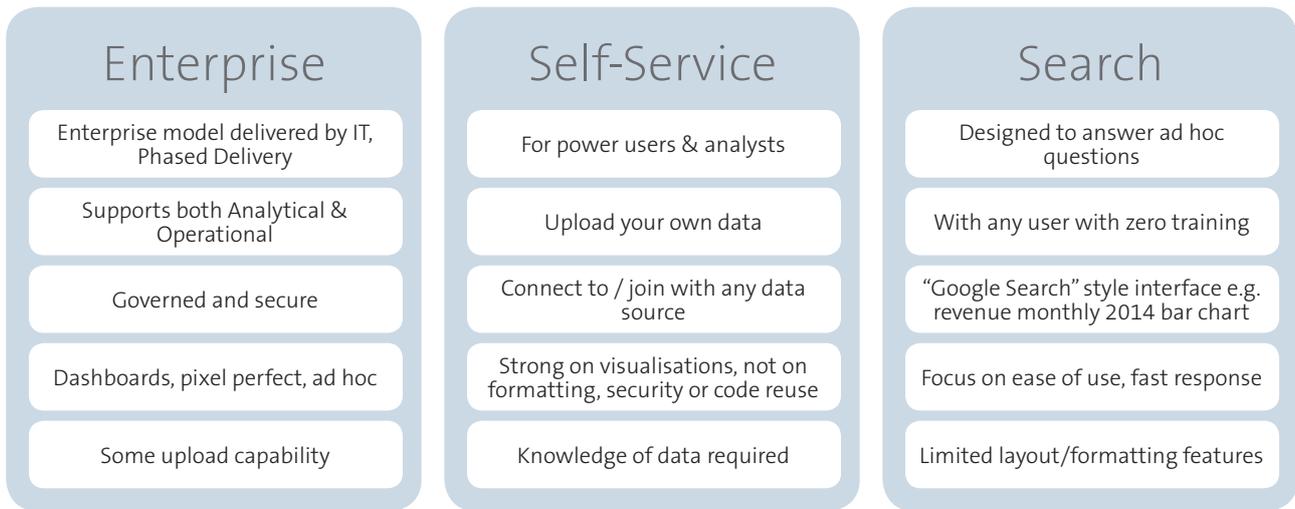


FIGURE 1

The above capabilities all together form, what I would like to define, as a modern analytics platform. Great if you have all three, tough if you only have one!

Let’s now take a look at how Oracle’s modern and unified analytics platform delivers the above functions.

1) Enterprise



BI Dashboards have always been a core part of OBIEE, and in more recent times, the Oracle BI Cloud Service (BICS). The core capabilities of OBIEE as an Enterprise tool are:

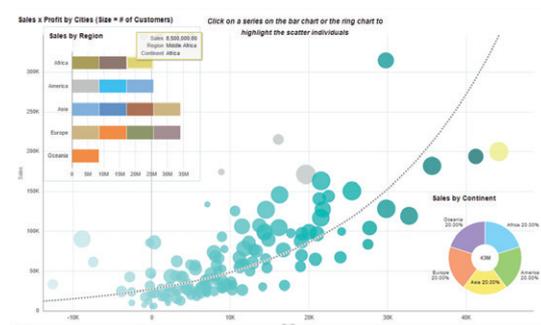
- Self-service dashboards delivered via IT (typically phased releases)
- Role based & personalised
- Interactive & intuitive
- Supports both analytical and operational (real-time) needs
- Ability to build custom ad hoc reports (against IT delivered data sources)
- Drill-down from summary to detail
- Governed & strong on security
- Great integration features (javascript, security, 3rd party portals etc)
- High fidelity, pixel-perfect reporting (BI Publisher)
- Mobile enabled

Enterprise tools are excellent from a governance and security view point, but will often have limitations such as:

- Limited capability for end users to consume their own custom content and data sources (e.g. spreadsheets)

- Data sources typically have to be logically modelled by a developer before end users can build reports
- The tools have a wide variety of charts and formatting features, but are lacking the more advanced charting features available in other visualisation tools (e.g. Oracle Data Visualization)

2) Self-Service



Oracle Data Visualization has enabled Oracle to take a giant leap into the self-service market. Feedback from our customers is that it is much easier to use and more intuitive to use than other “legacy” self-service tools on the market.

Here are its key features:

- Ideal for Business Analysts & Power Users
- Does not require involvement from IT
- Comes embedded within Oracle BI or as its own standalone desktop version
- Excellent on visualisations & ease of use
- Provides connectors to a wide variety of on-premise & cloud systems. Users can seamlessly pull data from “governed” data sources such as OBIEE (via logical SQL or analyses)
- Great features such as trends, outliers, storyboarding, forecasting, free-form layout
- Supports “mash-ups” involving a wide variety of data sources (cloud, on-premise databases, spreadsheets etc)

Self-Service tools are extremely versatile but do come with limitations:

- End users will need to have some technical experience as well

as knowledge of the backend data sources

- Governance & security can often be an issue – it is harder to control who has access to reports and to restrict what information people can see
- Administrators have little or no visibility of what reports are available or if users are building duplicate reports
- Self-service tools do not benefit from code re-use, you could have 10 reports using the same metrics but each with a slightly different definition
- Enterprise features such as variables and dashboard prompts are not as comprehensive, so it is harder to build sophisticated security models or applications in a Self-Service tool
- When you build visualisations within Oracle Data Visualization, the content cannot be viewed on OBIEE Dashboards – the visuals are completely separate to dashboards (maybe this will change in the future)

NOTE: Oracle Big Data Discovery is another self-service analytics product, this offers powerful data discovery and visualisation features aimed at data analysts / data scientists.

3) Search: BI Ask



BI Ask has had a relatively quiet introduction into the market, you may not have heard of it! But it comes embedded in Oracle BI (part of Oracle Data Visualization) and its simple “google search” style interface offers great potential as a “zero training” ad hoc question & answer tool:

Revenue X 2010 X Per NameMonth X bar chart X

The key features are:

- Designed for ad hoc questions & answers
- Google-style search bar
- Any user, zero training required
- Type-ahead / auto-complete features
- Metadata & data indexed
- Queries run against data sources provisioned by IT (Subject Areas)
- Voice integration planned

The search capability is achieved through indexing Subject Area contents within Oracle BI (both metadata and data).

Search tools naturally will come with limitations:

- They are designed for simple questions (e.g. “Sales 2016 Region Bar-Chart”), so you cannot ask questions that involve complex filters or calculations
- Limited opportunity to modify the layout and formatting
- Data sources need to be indexed prior to use, and re-indexed whenever fresh data is available
- Similar to search engines that are available on the internet, end users will expect results to appear promptly, so there is additional pressure on IT to make sure the queries generated will be fully optimised

In Summary

The analytics landscape has changed!

Oracle has delivered a modern analytics platform that provides comprehensive enterprise, self-service and search capabilities to meet the differing needs of your business functions, all within a single front-end. Customers no longer need to choose between “enterprise” or “self-service” vendors.

Analytics tools always have their pros and cons and it can be a challenge to balance the governed vs ungoverned ways of working. It is essential therefore to have a long-term strategy in place to make sure the available tools will be used effectively and appropriately. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Antony is an Oracle ACE for Business Intelligence and is one of Europe's leading BI architects with a focus on the Oracle BI and related database and middleware products including BI Foundation, Exalytics, BI Applications, Spatial, Real-Time Decisions (RTD), Big Data Discovery, Data-Mining, Endeca, SOA Suite and Oracle VM. He has over 15 years' experience working with Oracle BI and Data Warehousing and is the Technical Director at Peak Indicators.

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