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## BUSINESS VISION

The future of business intelligence depends on flexibility above all else, says Nobby Akiha, VP of Marketing at Actuate

A major reason that business intelligence solutions have failed to have the impact many organisations had hoped for is that the corporate knowledge that's now accessible is only available to an elite.

Whether it's thought of as business intelligence, data warehousing or knowledge management, the basic premise of all of these solutions is the same – providing an ability to consolidate and interpret the wealth of raw business data that comes into a company, so that this can be turned into strategic business advantage.

### Imagination failure

Businesses might fool themselves that this is already happening, because board directors can drill down into last month's sales figures to determine the relative performance of individual product ranges or sales teams, or because call centre staff can draw on previous customer transaction information or similar queries, to deliver a better customer experience.

Yet, even then, the chances are these companies are not using business intelligence to its full potential. This is because they are being limited in two ways - by the technology they are using, and by their visionaries' imaginations.

### Dynamism – the key to the unknown

Real business intelligence could go much further than this, and indeed should if businesses want to be able to rise to the challenges they face in today's aggressively competitive marketplaces.

As has been documented right across the business and technology media, commercial success today depends on the ability of an organisation to adapt rapidly to changing market trends, and customer demands. This requires an agility that many traditional businesses don't have, because they are held back by inflexible legacy systems and business processes. Data remains locked in silos, and it cannot be accessed and interpreted by just anyone.

Being agile means having business systems that can do not only what the business and its customer base require today, or even what they suspect may be demanded tomorrow. It also means being able to address the unknown, whenever that comes along.

IBM's current TV ad campaign, which talks about 'on-demand' computing, encapsulates this vision. In a business intelligence context, this means giving staff in many different job functions the ability to rapidly locate the information they need to do their jobs more effectively - in real time.

### Taking Google to heart

Ultimately, that means giving users a Google or Amazon-like experience, but with their own company's data. After all, isn't it a sorry state of affairs when your staff can find out more about their bank account or DVD-buying history than they can about the company they work for 48 hours+ a week? Yet this is the scenario found in most companies today.

To complete their current task, whatever that might be, staff may need information which they know must exist within the company, but which, today, could take them days or even weeks to track down. Imagine how much more proactive and productive they could be if a quick intranet search could bring them exactly the

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right information within just seconds? If a product development team could easily analyse feedback from the customer service departments, for example.

### It's all in the architecture

This is not easily achieved with traditional business intelligence tools, however. Commenting on new findings that only around 10% of workers use business intelligence solutions today, Forrester Research analyst Keith Gile told *Optimize* magazine that this is because 90% of users don't want to perform special queries or engage in analytical processing: "They want business intelligence served up to them in the context of what they're doing, making it a part of their everyday life."

The key to this is having a flexible and robust application development environment that enables developers to create enterprise reporting applications that meet the exact needs of their organisation, and which can scale to deliver information to as many people as required. The result is improved productivity, increased accountability and enhanced competitive advantage - because everyone is armed with information they need to make intelligent decisions and, consequently, take the right actions.

### Unclogging supply chains

It's odd, that so many consumer-facing businesses are doing this so well - ie giving their customers a highly responsive Internet experience - while so many business-to-business organisations fail not only their own staff in their information provision, but also their customers and business partners.

Much has been made of the potential to revolutionise financial and operational performance management, for example. But have radical changes really been made? In a few instances, perhaps, but predominantly transparent and agile enterprises remain the exception rather than the norm.

Of course, some of this is down to cultural hurdles - getting companies to be more open in the information they are prepared to share with one another. Yet, technology-wise, achieving greater financial and operational efficiencies means letting everyone in the organisation gain rapid and dynamic access to real-time financial and operational data so that they can respond rapidly and automatically.

Again, imagine what could be achieved if everyone in an organisation could locate the critical financial and operational information they needed as quickly and as effortlessly as their employees in their personal lives can log on to the Internet and track down the UK's top stockists of Jimmy Choo shoes, or find out

everything director Alan Ball ever created before *Six Feet Under*.

Not only could this result in lower operational costs for all the businesses involved, as wastage is reduced and resources are optimised, it also offers a superior experience to customers, who can now have exactly what they want, but at lower cost and without the wait.

### The good of the many...

Giving this sort of experience to staff, customers and business partners - or at least having the ability to extend this capability if and when it is considered appropriate - means empowering an organisation's system integrators and intranet/extranet builders to unlock important content and make it more readily available to much wider groups of users.

Of course, there will be security issues and access privileges to be considered, but, assuming these have been catered for, and that the blinkers have been lifted to the point where the organisation can appreciate what could be gained from allowing more people into their inner circle, the only remaining challenge is identifying the right technology platform on which to build this vision.

### Keep the real power under the bonnet

It's true what they say - knowledge is power. But harnessing that power effectively means being able to access it easily. Returning to the Google or Amazon comparison, this demands an information access environment that requires no special training, masks all the underlying technology from the user, and which will be as flexible and accommodating tomorrow as it is today.

In our book, that means empowering IT developers with flexible, open, rapid application development tools that enable them to continue to meet the needs of business content owners and managers today, tomorrow and long into the future, however these might grow and change.

But this must be achieved without blinding users with technology - without inhibiting the benefits they might glean from it because of its perceived complexity. If knowledge is power, then surely businesses would prefer that power to be as widespread and as free-flowing as possible?

### About the Author

Nobby joined Actuate in 2000 as vice president of Marketing and brings over 18 years of experience in high technology and consumer packaged goods marketing to the company. Prior to joining Actuate, he was vice president, Marketing and Business Development at Inference Corporation.

Nobby also served as senior consultant at Regis McKenna, Inc., Director of Marketing Communications for CASE vendor Interactive Development Environments (IDE) and Group Product manager at Oracle Corporation. Nobby started his marketing career consulting to consumer packaged goods companies at Management Decision Systems and Burke Marketing Research.

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