

EXPERT OPINION

Written by Giles Peacey

Giles is a Solution Director for SAP Business Intelligence at Atos Origin



CONSULTING > SOLUTIONS > OUTSOURCING



BUSINESS OBJECTS – AN INTELLIGENT ACQUISITION? >>

The pace of acquisitions in the Business Intelligence market has been rapid over the last few years. Hyperion, Cognos and Business Objects have all been bought, together with many other smaller Business Intelligence software companies. Now that the dust is settling on these merger and acquisition activities, it is a good time to take a step back and look at the product suite SAP has acquired.

For many years, SAP has followed a strategy of internal development to match the best-of-breed software in the Business Intelligence market. In many areas, this strategy has paid off but, in others, SAP lagged some way behind and was finding it difficult to narrow the gap. With the acquisitions of Pilot Software, Outlooksoft, and Business Objects, it is clear that SAP has changed its strategy and is now buying state-of-the-art software rather than developing it. But have the acquisitions given SAP a compelling offering in the Business Intelligence market?

Does SAP have a compelling
end-to-end Business Intelligence offering?

Developing a coherent IT strategy with Atos Origin and SAP Business Intelligence.

Can SAP deliver a Business Intelligence platform that provides all employees with timely and relevant information that will help them make informed decisions about their day-to-day activities?

Front-end visualisation tools

The front-end visualisation tools released with Netweaver BI7 were designed to enable BI for the masses, putting Business Intelligence tools into the hands of every user in their day-to-day activities. However, whilst a significant improvement on previous releases, they still favoured the business analyst rather than the casual user. This was great for heavy-duty analytical processing but did not encourage adoption on a wider level.

Many of the front-end tools in Business Objects are state-of-the-art, have high visual appeal and are easy to use. The Web Intelligence software, for example, allows the metadata of the data warehouse to be presented in easy-to-understand business terms. Query design is intuitive, with the look and feel of a Windows application – and the dashboard tools are tightly integrated with Microsoft Office. However, Business Objects is not as good at analytical analysis or Excel integration as the BEx analyser. This explains SAP's future product development plans to combine the best features of the BEx analyser and Business Objects toolsets in a new product called Pioneer.

Print-perfect reporting

Crystal Reports is the leading solution for high-quality formatted reports. Initially, Crystal Reports was fully integrated into the SAP solution (and licensed via OEM agreement) before it was bought by Business Objects. SAP then treated Crystal Reports as a competitor and released the Report Designer in Netweaver BI7, but it was an immature product and has had little user adoption. SAP has now announced that Report Designer will no longer be developed and Crystal Reports will be fully integrated with Business Intelligence.

Data warehousing

The latest SAP BI Netweaver data warehouse solution is exceptionally good, providing much easier data extraction from all the SAP transactional systems. Coupled with the Business Intelligence Accelerator solution for high-speed performance, it is clear that SAP has taken data warehousing to the highest level.

Integration

The integration of Business Objects software with the SAP business warehouse was already well developed prior to the acquisition. This integration will be improved further in future releases, ensuring infrastructure and maintenance costs are kept to a minimum. However, one of the main advantages of Business Objects is its openness rather than its tight integration. Many businesses have a complex landscape with SAP and non-SAP systems and, although they strive to have a single global data warehouse, it is often the case that multiple sources of data exist.

If you want a single user experience for Business Intelligence, this cannot be easily achieved with Netweaver BI7 tools. In contrast, Business Objects' openness enables seamless access to multiple sources of data, thus allowing users a one-stop-shop for Business Intelligence.

Corporate Performance Management (CPM)

SAP developed its own software for CPM known as Strategic Enterprise Management (SEM). This software was difficult to implement and use, and was not a widespread success.

SAP has changed direction and will no longer develop the SEM solution, instead using a number of software acquisitions to form a new leading-edge CPM product suite:

- > Strategy management will be delivered using software from Pilot Software
- > Financial planning and group consolidation will be delivered using software from Outlooksoft
- > Heavy-duty financial consolidation functionality will be delivered using software from Business Objects, previously developed by Cartesis
- > Profitability management will be delivered using the Business Objects' activity analysis software.

All of these software solutions are best-of-breed and offer the CFO a complete and compelling suite of functions. However, integrating the solutions, particularly at a data warehouse level, is difficult. SAP is therefore rapidly developing a Netweaver version of the product set to enable true integration and reduce implementation and support costs.

An intelligent acquisition?

SAP now has a complete end-to-end Business Intelligence platform to provide all employees with the information they need to carry out their activities more effectively. The acquisition of Business Objects and other Business Intelligence software has been complementary and has significantly strengthened the weak areas in the SAP product suite. The acquisition provides customers with a user-focused, high-performance and open solution that will enable widespread user adoption.

How do I get more information?

Atos Origin has a team of SAP and Business Objects consultants who can advise you on the best Business Intelligence strategy for your organisation. Please contact giles.peacey@atosorigin.com for more information.