

Five innovations that have shaped business intelligence

By [Gustav Piater](#)

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There are five noteworthy innovations that have significantly shaped the current era of business intelligence (BI).



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If the solution you're considering has all of them, you've picked a pioneering front-runner. If it doesn't or is playing catch-up, you may want to look around a little longer. (Hint: You're dealing with a very small pool of candidates.)

1. Enterprise web platform

In the early 2000s, most BI solutions were desktop-installed, proprietary enterprise software products that were difficult to use and deploy globally.

At the time, web technologies were in their infancy and few vendors would have chosen to build a web-based platform, yet some had the courage and vision to imagine (and build) an end-to-end workflow delivered in the browser.

Over time, this came to be a significant point of difference in the industry. Today, no vendor would even consider creating a product that doesn't have at least an element of web-based deployment, leaving many legacy providers battling to migrate their platforms to an online delivery model.

2. Metadata layer (and security)

The BI world owes much to enterprise architects joining the industry from the banking sector. Vendors, benefiting from their skills, inherited the insight that analytics doesn't happen at the desktop level, but throughout the enterprise. Products, therefore, must cater for an enterprise involvement, and have governance and security baked in.

On the back of this insight, visionary products were built around a metadata layer, so that businesses may control how their data is described and accessed in a distributed environment.



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A native metadata layer lends a strategic difference to solutions operating in a large enterprise or embedded developments. Vendors whose products include it can innovate in ways that others cannot replicate – the same flexibility simply cannot be achieved with a bolt-on solution.

3. Letting users create stories with data

Apart from architectural and platform-centric evolutions, BI solutions have also had to make functional strides.

Storyboarding is one way in which leading solutions have deviated from traditional BI and analytics.

Rather than just focusing on reporting and dashboards, storyboarding works on the principle that analytics deliver the most value when they tell a gripping story.

A dashboard, which is just a grouping of visualisations or tables, doesn't tell a story about the bigger picture. The user still needs to create a story from it. Realising this, pioneering solutions have for some time provided users with the tools to create stories that help them relate the meaning of the data – a much-copied strategy.

4. Designing for collaboration

But BI also has to offer more than core analytics, dashboards, reporting, and storyboarding.

A few advanced solutions have embraced the need for collaborative functionality, in keeping with organisations' need to share and communicate information. After all, the real users of information are business users, and they need more than dashboards to understand what drives numbers and to talk about them.



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A key evolution in collaborative tools is the use of timelines. Users can see everything that happened with their data and what people are saying about it, opening up a world of collaboration and insights into how people use information in the business.

The vast majority of products in the market today are analyst-bound and don't prioritise collaboration. But some are catching on, and collaboration for business users is becoming more pervasive.

5. Connecting users and content by automating insights

A truly ground-breaking recent innovation in BI has been the introduction of smart data discovery, which enables business users to easily arrive at insights from advanced analytics.

Several vendors have dabbled in smart discovery with search-based or visual tools, but few have managed to create mature products – mostly because the discovery experience has been centred around single islands of data rather than outcomes-based, enterprise-wide views. Similarly, such solutions don't offer business users the ability to ask why something happened or understand it quickly.



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Best-in-class smart data capabilities offer a collaborative approach bringing the business and content together by giving users the ability to engage with data, understand and learn from it, and share it. Without a metadata layer, vendors may find it hard to develop truly valuable data discovery capabilities, while those that do will pull ahead on their automation journey.

Basis for decision

Which of these capabilities does your vendor offer? If most of them, you may be onto a good thing. If not, this roundup ought to give you the basis for some very searching questions.

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