Users Demand Access to BI

In response, vendors update reporting, OLAP software.

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Some companies looking to deliver business intelligence software to growing numbers of end users are re-evaluating their mix of analysis and reporting tools in an effort to improve scalability and performance.

And vendors are responding to those concerns by updating reporting tools with stronger and more flexible data analysis capabilities and by boosting the performance of online analytical processing tools.

Not waiting for improved OLAP systems, the Ministry of Tourism in the Bahamas is in the first phase of a project scheduled to be completed later this year in which it will roll out Actuate Corp.'s enterprise reporting tool set to more than 400 users at hotels and regional tourist boards to boost its marketing efforts.

Previously, the ministry used an OLAP tool from Cognos Inc. without its reporting tool. The Cognos tool worked for the 25 users within the ministry itself but wouldn't have sufficed for the expanded project, said Jo Ram, chief operating officer at Actuate reseller Indusa Global in Montego Bay, Jamaica.

Users of tools from South San Francisco, Calif.-based Actuate will be able to view reports and drill down into them to get more information and do more of their own analysis, said Vincent Vanderpool-Wallace, the tourism ministry's director general.

Actuate allows companies to scale to large numbers of users because of its "bursting" technology. It controls user access to individual pages of a report based on preset parameters on what a user can see instead of creating a report for each user, said Kevin McDearis, vice president of data and delivery at CheckFree Corp., an electronic bill payment and banking services firm in Norcross, Ga. That feature is a key reason why CheckFree stuck with Actuate following a recent re-evaluation of its needs, McDearis said.

Scalability is also an issue for enterprises using homegrown reporting mechanisms. Basic American Foods Inc. in Walnut Creek, Calif., struggled with data integration and integrity issues while using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets for more than 100 users at multiple plant sites to maintain budget data, said Sally Smedal, Basic American's treasurer and controller. "As we have grown, certainly that product is not scalable," she said. By using reporting tools from Hyperion Solutions Corp. and doing away with spreadsheets, the company last year reduced budget preparation time by more than half while improving data integrity, Smedal said.

Traditional reporting vendors like Actuate, Information Builders Inc. and Business Objects SA, with its acquired Crystal Decisions tool, are "basking in the scalability wars" as user companies look to bring BI to the masses, said Wayne Eckerson, director of research at The Data Warehousing Institute in Seattle.

From the start, enterprise reporting tools have been designed to provide reports to large volumes of users in server-based processing environments, Eckerson said. In contrast, OLAP tools were designed for more complex analysis for high-end power users and require significantly more processing power.

Vendors in both camps are revamping their offerings to meet the demands of more users, with reporting vendors adding some OLAP-like capabilities for slicing and dicing data and OLAP vendors speeding up their analytics, Eckerson added.

For example, the latest version of Hyperion's Essbase OLAP tool, launched in October, "blows the socks off" OLAP scalability, Eckerson said. And MicroStrategy Inc., a longtime player in the OLAP world, added enterprise reporting to its product lineup late in 2003. This week, the company will add embedded OLAP into enterprise reports and allow users to define and refine reports over the Web.