

# Data analytics for the masses

**MAURICE LYNCH** discusses how Irish organisations need to be best prepared to deal with the continuing data explosion

According to a recent Gartner report, 47% of companies ranked the increase in data as one of the top three challenges they are currently facing. This comes as no surprise given the sheer rise in data sources, increased pressure on businesses for detailed reports and rising security requirements.

The worldwide explosion of data is placing a huge strain on companies' IT infrastructures, making data harder to maintain and control. In many cases, organisations have their data stored across multiple silos and data sources, resulting in users getting whatever information they can from the source closest to them. More often than not, spread sheets and custom reports are the common route that frontline users turn to. This incomplete view of information can lead to poor decision making for the business.

## Empowering users

In today's modern economy, it's crucial that a staff has quick and instant access to the information required. Users on the frontline, middle and top management can all benefit from having immediate access to simple reports in real time as it empowers them to get answers to their most critical business questions.

Self-service data analytics significantly reduces the pressure often placed on the IT department to pull reports and feedback information to the relevant departments. In essence, this self-service nature removes the need

for information to be passed back and forward between the users and the technical team resulting in increased time savings and more productive, responsive staff.

Having access to the right data at the right time can be a powerful resource for businesses, leading to better decision making, more effective budget management and a higher performance overall. However, a clear, realistic data management strategy also needs to be put in place and supported by management to ensure the business is getting the most from their data.

## Choosing the right solution

Businesses have a wide range of data solutions to choose from. Although many appear to be similar, it is the way in which they can be applied to an organisation that greatly differs. For instance, the "Big Business Intelligence (BI)" vendors typically offer general purpose tools while the niche BI providers often provide a more tailored, industry specific solution.

In recent times, it is widely documented that business intelligence tools are becoming far more sophisticated and more adaptable to the users' requirements. Ad-hoc data analytics tools in particular are rising in popularity as they empower users to answer their business questions "on the fly". Users can also create reports or drill deeper down into reports to get the information they require.

With some 1.8 zettabytes of data predicated to be generated

in 2011, according to a new IDC Digital Universe study, Irish business and IT leaders must look at ways to effectively manage and leverage their data assets. Many organisations are achieving this by making BI more pervasive. Local authorities, for example, are now better able to access key performance indicators and make cost cuts in line with national budget based on the data assets they uncover.

Fingal County Council is a good example of an Irish local authority that is using data analytics technology to best effect. It recently identified significant savings and efficiencies across the organisation through data analysis of key areas including rates collections, purchasing practices, resource planning and attendance management.

## Emerging trends

The integration of data analytics and cloud computing is fast becoming the biggest technology trend of the past ten years. The powerful combination of on-demand access and a more cost friendly, flexible structure ensures users are able to create secure, interactive reports and get the data insights they require to make smarter decisions. A provider such as Google supported by a real-time, widely accessible data analytics tool is a cost effective alternative for organisations that want to gain greater value from their data but do not want a large scale software investment.

Another key trend is mobile data analysis "on the go". Mobile access to business reports and charting is now something which more people, particularly top management, turn to as they want to access KPIs and performance metrics anytime, anywhere. Data analytics tools are becoming far more visual with advanced, dynamic charting now becoming a much sought after feature. Not just seen as "eye candy" or a nice feature to have, visual charting

provides immediate feedback to users on what they really want to know.

Social media has become a powerful force in recent times. Through collecting and analysing social media data alongside the rest of business data, it creates a significant competitive advantage and drives increased value. It ultimately leads to a more accurate, 360 degree view of what's really happening across the business.

## Pervasive

With so much new data being created every day, Irish organisations need to look at real-time information discovery options which work across multiple data sources and applications. This will help to unearth much needed intelligence and bring it together in one interface to make more informed, timely decisions.

Data analytics is becoming more mainstream as it is no longer restricted to just the top level management team. We predict a greater number of frontline users will soon be using self-service data analytics to gain better insights into their underlying systems and applications.

For data analytics to become truly pervasive, the technology needs to be easy to use and quick to implement across the organisation. Non-management involvement is also crucial to promote use throughout the business. Both strategic and tactical decision making can be improved as users have access to the information needed to fuel smarter choices.

Having fast and simple access to better intelligence should be a prerequisite for public sector and business users at all levels in Ireland right now. It will help us to become more agile, efficient and competitive in this fast-changing marketplace. ■

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