



Spotlight On AOL

BRETT COHEN, SENIOR ANALYST



AOL is a leading-edge web services company, with an offering of premium and niche content sites, world-class tools and platforms. As Senior Analyst, Brett Cohen speaks about how in one year his team and AOL became a fully-integrated Tableau organization and his department helped deliver self-service business intelligence to its clients. “We basically turned ourselves from a push model where we send out reports to a pull model where people are in charge of what data that they need,” Brett explained at the 2011 Tableau U.S. Customer Conference. “We can set up an easy report in a matter of minutes, publish it to the dashboard and now they can pull it when they want.”

TABLEAU:

How big is the data you work with?

BRETT:

The data we work with is huge. We get tens of millions of searches daily, and we capture between 20 and 40 rows of data per search. So, that's 400 to 800 million records every single day. So, our data is ginormous, and Tableau helps us manage that data, put it out in pictures, and analyze it pretty quickly.

TABLEAU:

What problems were you facing that caused you to use Tableau at AOL?

BRETT:

Some of the major problems that we were facing included our data not being integrated with the corporate data repository. So now we have all of our reports within the Tableau Server where everyone can access, and you can grant access or not grant access to whoever needs to see those reports.

TABLEAU:

How has Tableau changed your workflow?

BRETT:

Before Tableau, people would have to come to me or someone else on the BI team for any question related to search data, search activity, search performance. It would either be in a flash or an ad hoc report that I would have to pull. If they needed it on a regular basis to track say a campaign or a test, I'd be pulling that data every single day: not fun. Now, we can just set up an easy report in a matter of minutes where we can just publish it to the dashboard and now they can pull it when they want.

TABLEAU:

So Tableau has helped you to enable self-service Business Intelligence?

BRETT:

We basically turned ourselves from a push model where we send out reports to a pull model where people are in charge of what data that they need. The data is there. You don't need to go searching for it, you don't need to go querying for it, you don't need to pull it every single day, you have the automatic updates, you have the server, you can just access what you need, and it's great.

TABLEAU:

How has Tableau impacted you personally?

BRETT:

It's helped me personally from going from spending time on creating reports to spending more time on solving problems or fixing issues. There was one report that I'd have to do it weekly and monthly. Every fourth or fifth week I'd do two reports, and each would take a good hour or so. So, Tableau basically saved 64 hours from my work,, which is almost like eight business days—and that's just one report.

TABLEAU:

So Tableau is a real time saver?

BRETT:

Before Tableau, we'd have to work with teams all over the globe and make sure all the queries are right and go through 17 different steps of QA. That would take maybe two weeks to put a whole report together from concept to production. Instead, we can do that in minutes, hours, or sometimes with the more complex ones that would take weeks or months to do, we can do in a day or two.

TABLEAU:

And you're planning to get your own server for your department?

BRETT:

It's very easy to use the server. You could sit down with someone in a matter of an hour or two and show them how to pull their data and how they need to get everything that they need to do their job and to get better analytics faster, and that's the summation of what Tableau has given us, better data and better insights at a faster pace. I mean, it's pretty fast right now, but it's going to be even faster once we get our own server.

“Now I can spend more time on solving problems and fixing issues than actually pulling or creating reports and doing ad hoc data pulls.”

TABLEAU:

So, you use Tableau to analyze real-time data?

BRETT:

One of the awesome features of Tableau is that we're able to look at data in real time and set up a real-time tracker where we can track performance of our different products in search areas pretty much every 15 minutes. And see they're going and how they're trending throughout the day.

TABLEAU:

Can you give us an example of that in action?

BRETT:

Executives need to monitor a change. So, if we make the change at say 6 AM, how is it doing at 7, are we making money, are we losing money, is it taking off, is it not taking off? Tableau really helps us see if changes that we are making are working or not working. Tracking data in real time has really brought a great value to our organization. Tableau helps us see if our data tracking is working properly. If we see a flat line in that tracker, either our data tracking is off or something is really wrong with our product.

TABLEAU:

Do you feel people need to be technical to create great visualizations?

BRETT:

You don't need to be the most technical person in order to get the most out of the product. You can be just a regular analyst or just a regular businessperson and be able to create these visualizations that can help you see your data in an easy to manipulate way or an easy to access for whatever metrics you're looking for.

I'm not very technically oriented, and I'm able to build pretty cool visualizations in a matter of minutes or hours.

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