



5 steps to better business intelligence

How best-in-class BI builds on the industry's history, then throws it out

After a 30-year history of the business intelligence (BI) industry, best practices are finally emerging. And for the most part, those best practices involve throwing out the first 25 years of the industry.

Perhaps “throwing out” is too strong: the early days of BI gave us concepts and tools to build on. But a BI implementation was typically complicated, heavy, expensive and slow. Companies spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours but never attained the promise of intelligence through data—never mind intelligence when and where you need it.

Some companies are becoming more competitive by using analytics strategically. These companies follow best practices that build on the legacy of BI, then throw it out. Here are five.

1 Get Rid of the Queue with Self-Service Tools

It seems simple: let people answer their own questions. But legacy business intelligence systems forced people to answer basic questions about their data by submitting requests to developers who would then prioritize them, write code, and eventually deliver an answer. Any changes went through the same process. Hence the famous BI “queue” which subjected business users to long wait times and frustration.

Best practice? Get out of the queue.

The people who can best answer questions are the very people asking them. The promise of self-service business intelligence is to let people create ad-hoc analytics to communicate a result, answer a question or just satisfy their own curiosity. Because the pace of business today is such that anyone standing in a queue gets left behind.

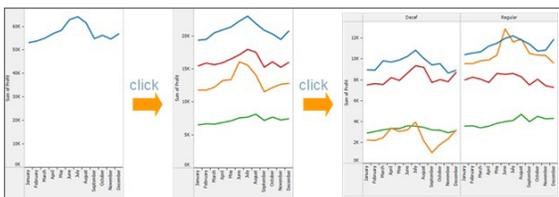


Figure 1: Easy-to-use, self-service tools get users out of the IT queue.

2 Make Dashboards People Want to Use

Legacy business intelligence systems meant spending months creating hard-to-use dashboards and analytics tools. People had to go to training to understand how to use even the tools for end-users, never mind developers. This created an inventory of dashboards and reports that people didn’t use. The consumerization of software has taught us that people will use tools that are attractive and usable. People readily adopt new apps on their phones and new online tools if they find them useful. Why should BI be any different?

Best-in-class BI includes a focus on interactive, beautiful, and easily accessible analytics. New BI systems deliver dashboards and reports right in a web browser so users don’t have to jump through hoops simply to see their data. They support the same dashboards on mobile devices so the information gets to the places where decisions are being made. New tools allow people to design analytics that feel delightful rather than oppressive. As a result, people use those analytics—and the business gets smarter.



Figure 2: Make dashboards people want to use.

3 Acknowledge the Reality of Data

Legacy business intelligence had a concept of a single data architecture that was fast, scalable and held only clean data. It’s a wonderful idea. The problem is that no business exists with this ideal data architecture. Real businesses have multiple data sources of varying types

and capabilities. The data source that is perfect and complete is most likely also obsolete.

The best practice for the next generation of BI tools is to let you work with all of your data, from spreadsheets to the most sophisticated databases and data warehouses. It also means embracing new technologies like Hadoop that bring new capabilities to the enterprise. And it means bringing any new data sources into compliance with your data governance practices, so that data can be maintained properly and shared across the organization.

What if you could blend in new data sources on the fly? The answer to a question is rarely well-behaved enough to sit obediently in a single database. Blending sales data with operational and finance data yields answers that are much richer and more useful than analyzing single data silos. Publishing that blended data brings it into view of everyone with the proper credentials, and multiplies its usefulness because now others can run analyses against the combined data.

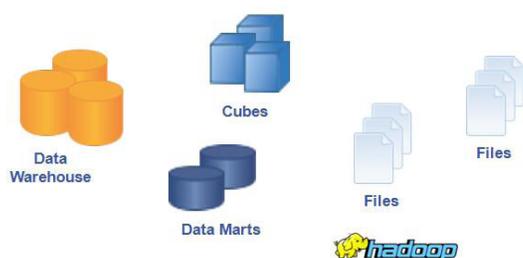


Figure 3: Disparate data. Look familiar?

4 Wrangle Big Data

Here's the promise of big data: to find intelligence in the outliers that aggregated data loses. To understand new customer behaviors with new sources of data like sensors and web analytics. To work with all your data, rather than reduce it into a schema that might prevent you from asking new questions in the future. But if legacy BI forced the normal user into a queue for a report, working with big data was even worse: it meant big projects, new data warehouses and a lot of time and money. Or sub-setted, IT-driven schemas that didn't give users access to all the data they needed.

Best practice BI provides tools for working with big data just like any other data. Direct querying of big data sources, fast in-memory extracts that anyone can define, and intelligent filtering mean that users keep the ability to ask and answer questions—even when the questions are big.

5 Integrate with Your Existing Systems

A traditional business intelligence implementation was such a grand undertaking that companies would sometimes rip out existing systems. Or they would accept painful tradeoffs that limited the potential of their BI or other infrastructure. Or they would invest thousands of dollars into custom development and integration, so that everything worked perfectly—at huge cost.

Best practice BI systems force none of these outcomes. A good business intelligence platform is friendly—it plays well with your existing security and data architecture by allowing you to:

- Work with your existing security systems, like ActiveDirectory
- Choose whether you want to query live data or work in-memory
- Provide metadata management without locking you into a certain model
- Enable users share data connections and dashboards easily
- Author once and share on multiple devices

Don't get stuck in a cycle of unending report building without ever getting to the actual insights, because it's hard to achieve best-in-class analytics when you're hung up implementing it.

Conclusion

The new world of business intelligence builds on and breaks from the old. These best practices are followed by organizations working at the pace of modern business and getting smarter every day.

About Tableau

Tableau Software helps people see and understand data. Ranked by Gartner and IDC in 2011 as the world's fastest growing business intelligence company, Tableau helps anyone quickly and easily analyze, visualize and share information. More than 7,000 companies get rapid results with Tableau in the office and on-the-go. And tens of thousands of people use Tableau Public to share data in their blogs and websites. See how Tableau can help you by downloading the free trial at www.tableausoftware.com/trial.