Theoretically, search technology can inject more user-friendliness into business intelligence tools.

BY DREW ROBB AND JONATHAN HOPFNER

Even a company's most valuable information is squirreled away in various departmental silos, and it takes an IT or statistics guru to coax it out. But what if workers could get that information—whether it's in the form of data tables or text—using an interface that is as easy to use as a Google search box?

That's the thinking behind the marriage of business intelligence (BI) software and enterprise search technology. While other aspects of IT have become more user-friendly, the creation of BI reports has remained an arcane specialty. In the past year, however, the technology that can change this finally became available. In April last year, Google released OneBox for Enterprise, which enabled Google's search appliances to search structured data contained in databases and data warehouses in addition to text.

"The introduction of the Google OneBox API was a watershed event," says analyst Whit Andrews of US-based IT research and advisory firm Gartner. "We have seen the BI vendors approach search with real eagerness, and it is a rare BI vendor today who can't tell you about an integration [of its BI software] to an enterprise search product."

Hyperion, Oracle and SAS Institute are among the BI vendors that have created links between their BI products and OneBox. In December last year, IBM and Yahoo released a free enterprise search application called IBM OmniFind Yahoo Edition, and Cognos announced a link between its Cognos 8 Go Search engine and OmniFind Business Objects, meanwhile, has bundled sophisticated text analytics tools into the latest version of its productivity suite, and is also collaborating with companies like Google, IBM and Oracle on the "Open Search Initiative", a partner network established to promote the union of BI and search technologies. SAP has forged a more independent path, according to Derek Judge, director for business analytics at SAP Asia Pacific and Japan. He says the firm has developed its own search engine solution to avoid the support and licensing issues that could arise from a "marriage of convenience" with another vendor. A trial version of the result can be downloaded for free and will be commercially available before the year-end.

A 360-DEGREE VIEW

So what benefits can the emerging BI-search synergy bring to the average organization? One is the ability to combine the information contained in structured and unstructured data sources. That gives users a broader understanding of an issue. IDC analyst Sue Feldman says that creating a single point of access to all corporate information is one of the top three information management problems that companies are trying to solve.

"This problem has only become greater in the last couple years as enterprises realise their decision making systems have often been ignoring the content side," says Feldman. "Some of the most important parts of their business are in the unstructured or semi-structured data—customer emails, text files in CRM (customer relationship management) systems—which can help them know about impending problems and avoid product recalls."

The no-frills functionality typified by Google's web search offering also promises to inject more user-friendliness into BI offerings, vendors say.

Hyperion's Google-powered smart search product "provides an innovative way for end users to quickly find the reports, dashboards, annotations, task lists, forms and data they need to execute business processes," says S Gurubhagavathi, Hyperion's managing director for Asia and India. "Users can now search for answers to their business questions using a very familiar and easy [front end] that they are familiar with, based on the Google.com experience."

Content search and search on data capabilities "can bring relevant information to those who are infrequent BI users today," agrees VR Sivakumar, vice-president for South Asia at Business Objects. This bolsters intelligence analysis and "exposes other vital, previously undetectable events and relationships."

This ability to access BI data through a simple text search, instead of writing a database query is seen as a marriage of convenience. Continued on page 15

Turning a Google-like search engine loose on corporate information sounds easy but it isn't.

- What looks like magic in vendor demos actually requires painstaking, behind-the-scenes work to map data queries to the data sets.
- Organisations need search algorithms that help employees find important reports within the company—without necessarily algorithms based on popularity rankings.
- Different departments (finance or sales, for example) will have different search requirements.
- Access controls are required so that employees cannot gain unauthorised access to sensitive information.
- Companies may already have a hodgepodge of search engines embedded in various applications and portals.
- Buyers will have to choose among various technology options, ranging from Google's search appliance to sophisticated text-mining tools that analyse unstructured data.
- There are numerous vendors with advanced search technologies born in the academic and government sectors that are in search of problems to solve in the business sector.
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one of the key advantages of this developing practice. Staffers can get the data they need without waiting for BI specialists to craft a custom report.

"We are seeing a significant interest from clients in the notion of BI for the masses," says Gartner's Andrews. "They want to be able to get access to BI through a simpler process so that more people are able to solve the problems that BI addresses."

SAP's Judge says the ability to sift through unstructured and structured data that web-style search engines have previously covered in a limited fashion is a "powerful development." Instead of random bits of information, users running a search on customers, employees, or partners, can be presented with every piece of intelligence the company owns on the subject, from financial history to passing references in corporate reports. This will provide an obvious boost to strategy and decision-making.

ENTICING PROSPECT
Still, for all its promise even the proponents of enterprise search technology admit it remains relatively untested, especially in Asia. Shivkumar believes that will soon change, saying Hyperion's existing customers in the region have expressed "very high" interest in its new search offering. Srivatsan thinks the uptake of search tools will be particularly strong among larger, more mature companies, which tend to have much more data to deal with.

IT executives contacted by Computerworld Singapore say they are watching the development of enterprise search closely but seem likely to content themselves with looking for a while longer before taking the plunge and investing in search-equipped solutions.

Michael Fung, associate director at Singapore Management University, said enterprise search technology would be "of interest in the near future," with the "federated search capabilities across multiple data sources" and the potential to facilitate "easy retrieval of relevant information and data for users," among its most appealing features for the institution.

Henk Balsters, vice-president of IT at automation technology specialist Emerson Process Management, is also keen on putting enterprise search solutions to the test, but isn't overly confident about the results. "It's very promising but I'm not sure when it will be ready for 'prime time,'" he explains.

As the technology advances it is likely to lure more converts from those currently sitting on the fence. Business Objects, for example, is promising further integration among its own content, the internet, corporate repositories and applications, as well as new "results navigation" that will sort the output of an extensive enterprise BI search by relevance in much the same way that Google, Amazon and eBay tally results on the web.

SAP is promising to build further bridges between BI and decision-making processes by investing its solutions with more analytic functions, or making them accessible via interfaces as ubiquitous as Microsoft's Outlook. And Hyperion will also stretch its search capabilities to cover the web, Microsoft Office, and desktops. One stage in the search for better BI, it seems, may be coming to a close.