Anatomy of a Decision

*BI Platform vs. Tool: Choosing Birst Over Tableau for Enterprise Business Intelligence Needs*

**What You Need To Know**

The demand for enterprise business intelligence initiatives has skyrocketed on the promise to empower businesses to make better data driven decisions. Access to BI tools is no longer only in the jurisdiction of a select few employees highly trained in statistical analysis. Line of business users are demanding better insight into core business problems and they need access to these insights faster than ever before. A host of BI vendors have rushed to meet these needs and a number of viable options present themselves to any buyer looking to implement a BI solution. Given the variety of options, it is difficult for a business leader to feel confident in any one decision. As such there is a need to educate the market on how to best map organizational needs and business drivers to the strengths of particular BI vendors. This report summarizes the decision process of five firms as they navigated the BI vendor selection process with a specific focus on two often compared competitors Birst and Tableau. Each of the five studied firms are current Birst customers and considered Tableau during their solution selection process. It is the aim of this report to distill the key alignments of business needs and solution strengths that ultimately lead to the choice of Birst over Tableau.

**About the Study Participants**

Five current Birst customers across a variety of industries were interviewed for this study. Although the customers participated in the study under anonymity, they represent a continuum of both size and industry. Represented in the study are: one of the largest healthcare insurers in the United States with almost $50 billion in revenue and with nearly 50,000 employees, a top 50 construction software company serving the oil & gas, mining, and power industries, a global concierge services provider, a New York based regional health information organization (RHIO), and one of the largest engineering software providers in the world with revenues upwards of $2.3 billion and over 7,500 employees.

Each study participant identified a business need to implement a BI solution to create either a client facing service or to accomplish a new internal initiative. In the solution selection process each organization considered Birst and Tableau as possible options for the undertaking, along with a number of other BI vendors.

**Drivers for Change and Requirements**

While the specific use cases reported varied from company to company, Blue Hill recognized commonalities across the study. In each case, participants were driven by the need to get better insight from their data. This manifested itself in the form of internally facing applications, such as empowering line of business decision making and improved analytics from existing CRM solutions, as well
as in client facing applications that drove net new revenue. A key element driving each implementation was the necessity of meaningfully connecting and integrating a variety of complex data sources.

Throughout the study a number of requirements surfaced that were common to all participants. Participants required a BI application that:

- Was flexible to scale with expanding data sources
- Emphasized broader user access and adoption
- Was able to connect disparate data sources
- **Presented a unified platform across each level of data analytics**

**Scalability:** Participants expressed the necessity of scalability as each anticipated quickly growing data inputs. Cloud based deployments were seen as an operational requirement as investing in physical warehousing infrastructure was an unappealing alternative. The issue here was not with the upfront financial cost of the physical infrastructure but rather with the longer timeframe to deployment, continued upkeep, and comparative difficulty to scale associated with on premise warehousing.

**Emphasized broader user access and adoption:** Overall ease of access and adoption across a broad range of users also rose up as a key requirement. When considering solutions, usability was imperative – both for ease of implementation and ease of future expansion. Commonly, line of business users and other users who are not highly specialized in statistical analysis were ‘touching’ the solution. To maximize the value of the BI application, each participant understood that the interface chosen needed to be intuitive and possess a high degree of usability.

**Ability to connect disparate data sources:** For the majority of participants the ability for the chosen application to connect disparate data sources was mission critical to their initiative’s success. Blue Hill observed this scenario to be best highlighted in the case of the New York based RHIO. As an organization, this participant is responsible for aggregating the healthcare information of hundreds of thousands of patients within its geographic area. The participant needed a solution that would allow them to analyze a wide array of information such as past medical test history, insurance information, and medical records – all of which were separately housed and collected in their own data environments. The ability to connect these disparate data sources and analyze the information in one cohesive solution was an underlying fundamental to success.

**Unified BI platform:** Blue Hill documented that the most important requirement across the study was the need for a solution that presented a unified platform across each level of data analytics. For insight to be gleaned from data it must be managed throughout the process of collection to analysis. This encompasses the process of extracting, transforming and loading (ETL) the data into where it is stored, or warehoused, and making it available through the unified logical model before it can be analyzed through means of discovery or visualization to ultimately provide guidance on business decisions.

Solutions exist that specialize in each of these phases of data analytics individually. However, because the initiatives of the participants were broader...
than just providing a ‘top layer’ of insight upon existing data – Blue Hill observed that the need to effectively accomplish all of these layers within one ‘end to end’ solution rather than multiple solutions was imperative.

Financial costs of the BI implementations were generally considered only a secondary selection requirement. However each participant acknowledged finite internal resources in regards to personnel time and capacity, making a unified platform essential.

Solution Selection and Comparison

Common to each participant in the study was that both Birst and Tableau were included the initial solution selection search. A host of alternative providers were also included in the search across the participants. It should be noted that along with Birst and Tableau, Qlik and Pentaho frequently arose as alternative options considered.

Blue Hill observed that the most frequently cited reasons for the initial consideration of Birst and Tableau differed materially from one another. Birst was frequently brought into the discussion after an assessment of mapping capabilities to business drivers. Birst’s reputation as a cloud BI vendor and its ‘end to end’ solution functionality were the main reasons for consideration. Blue Hill observed that Tableau was initially considered largely because of the market excitement and penetration among line of business users that it has received over the previous years. Tableau is known widely as one of the most popular data visualization tools on the market. This was seen to be enough to merit the initial consideration of Tableau.

After initial solution candidates were decided upon, each participant began the next level of the selection process by testing and comparing the usability and functionalities of both solutions. It is during this evaluation that participants highlighted the comparative strength of the Birst platform as compared to Tableau. In general, Blue Hill observed that participants evaluated the front ends of both solutions as comparable.

Blue Hill observed that participants selected Birst once comparisons were made involving the ‘back end’ capabilities of the two solutions, meaning ETL, automated data warehousing and Birst’s business logic layer. Although Tableau goes to market touting an ‘end to end’ solution, Blue Hill observed that Tableau’s offerings were seen largely as inadequate to meet the participants’ requirements. Without a robust solution to effectively unite multiple unstructured sources, the participants could not achieve the objectives of their initiative. In other words, top-level analysis would be meaningless without access to the right data across multiple stakeholders and business analysts.

This presented a major competitive advantage for Birst over Tableau in addressing two crucial business drivers: faster time to value and reducing strain on finite internal resources.

“Collectively my team and I have 60 plus years of experience in the business intelligence world. Our company is only a few years old and so in starting from scratch we knew it was critically important to get ‘the plumbing’ straight. We had a strong preference for Birst as it had the best plumbing. Over the years we have spent too much time trying to sort out backend issues just to get the visualization’s to work.”

Sr. Business Intelligence Analyst
Healthcare
**Faster time to value:** Companies participating in the research cited that Birst ultimately provided the fastest time to value of the compared solutions. This was largely in part due to the single platform environment of Birst’s solution. The general ease of use of the application paired with Birst’s ability to automate large portions of the ETL process combined to create deployment times that were perceived to be materially faster than Tableau.

**Reducing strain on finite internal resources:** To accomplish business objectives while using Tableau’s solution, study participants referenced the possibility of combining a specialized provider to compliment Tableau’s capabilities. Ultimately however, participants noted the potential pitfalls of patch working an ‘end to end’ solution from multiple providers. Key to this reservation is the inevitable organizational strain of integration. This manifests itself in both the facets of initial deployment complexity, as well as ongoing issues of data governance.

Multiple participants cited years of experience with BI implementations and identified that a reoccurring pain point in past implementations resulted from the integration of multiple solutions across the layers of data analytics. That is to say, combining different solutions for ETL, warehousing, and top level analysis often resulted in unanticipated headaches and delays.

A consistent business representation of data across all levels of analytics and across the breadth of sources analyzed was essential to accomplishing the participants’ objectives. Birst’s business logical layer provided this capability and thus was seen to reduce overall complexity with the implementation. Participant’s cited the competing needs for effective data governance while maintaining user flexibility. Using a single platform was seen as a means to reduce downstream data governance issues. In this way, Birst was seen as the superior choice as it would allow employees to focus on other value adding activities as opposed to maintenance or support.

Between Birst and Tableau, Birst was identified as the solution that could best accomplish the participant organizations’ BI initiatives. Birst’s ability to provide a single platform to handle the process of connecting disparate data sets all the way to providing top-level insights was the clear decision point. Ultimately Tableau’s less robust back end functionality meant that Birst presented a better value proposition in terms of meeting business needs.

“We did a net present value calculation of all our candidates based on 60 functional requirements. We had an additional subjective layer that was weighted in as well. The result was that Birst ended up as number one.”

Director of Project Management
Software Manufacturing
Blue Hill Analysis: Platform vs. Tool

The fundamental theme to arise from the study was a discussion of the merits of a BI platform as compared to a BI ‘tool’. Tableau has historically gone to market as a user-friendly tool aimed at empowering line of business users. This strategy has met with significant levels of success, as can be seen by the mindshare that Tableau attracts in this space. But while Tableau has gained traction here, it is clear that their solution is less well suited to handle enterprise initiatives demanding the robust infrastructure of a BI platform. Tableau began as a desktop tool for visualization to be used by individuals. The company is now working to expand its capabilities across the deeper layers of data analytics, thus leaving its comparative enterprise appeal lacking behind Birst.

Blue Hill observed the importance of a common business logic semantic layer when companies are considering an enterprise wide BI initiative. Because Birst’s solution runs from ‘end to end’, Birst’s unified logical model ensures the data is commonly defined for each user running an analysis. There is a contrast drawn when using an application designed fundamentally for the top-level analysis. In these cases each individual user has the opportunity to define data independently. When deployed on an enterprise level, this would mean that different users running the same analysis with the same data could yield different results if they had defined inputs differently. Consider a scenario in which one user defines revenue only as recognized revenue and another does not. This consequence is an inherent difference between deploying an enterprise wide BI ‘tool’ as opposed to a BI platform.

**Figure 1: Birst from Data to Insight**

Conclusion

The solution selection process of the studied companies showcases the business drivers and needs that must be considered when planning a BI initiative. Birst was ultimately selected over Tableau because of the functionality and
capabilities that its unified platform was able to provide. Beyond just functionality, the business decisions to choose Birst were grounded in the context that Birst represented an opportunity to minimize time to value, reduce internal capacity constraints, and ultimately maximize positive organizational gains by meeting business needs.

Regardless of size or industry, as organizations consider which solution provider is best suited for their BI initiatives they would do well to consider the benefits of a unified ‘end to end’ BI platform.

Authors: James Haight, Research Analyst; jhaight@bluehillresearch.com; Ralph Rodriguez, Chief Research Officer; rrodriguez@bluehillresearch.com

Published: March 2014