

WHITE PAPER

Achieving a Unified Approach to Governed Business Intelligence and Self Service

Defining the Next Iteration of Looker

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Introduction

Data-fueled decisions are critical to organizational success. As more data is created, collected, analyzed, and shared, organizations are rapidly morphing into “data-driven” entities that rely more heavily on quantifiable, verifiable data and less on gut instinct, suppositions, and assumptions. Research from TechTarget’s Enterprise Strategy Group (ESG) points out that organizations are increasingly turning data into new products and services that not only act as new sources of revenue and profits, but also form the basis for insights to help them make smarter decisions. ESG notes that 70% of organizations expect they will develop and offer new data-centric products and services over the next 24 months, representing a 35% increase in sentiment in their plans compared with two years earlier.¹



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But this is becoming more challenging for two reasons. First, it comes as no surprise to learn that data continue to grow relentlessly in sheer volume. However, data is also expanding dramatically in diversity due to the explosion in unstructured data. Second, data scientists are no longer the only ones using data to make key business decisions. All business users across all organizational functions are now empowered and even required to drive data-based decisions.

Of course, this is often a challenging scenario. Data-based insights are essential, but it’s harder to gain those insights, and it typically takes longer to act on those insights. Organizations face complex challenges that make their tasks more difficult, especially with so much data potentially available. Key limitations to getting the most out of all that data include a perceived lack of trust inside the organization that those insights are based on properly vetted data as per governance guidelines and the lack of analytics tools using self-service methodologies. Without confidence in the accuracy, timeliness, and integrity of the data, users must get IT involved, which adds time and complexity to the decision-making process for business users.

Ideally, organizations would have a unified platform that leverages a tightly governed, but easy-to-use, analytics platform.

The Challenges of Juggling Strict Data Governance and Flexible Data Access

It may seem like a utopian goal to combine enterprise-class data governance with flexible data access (personified by self service). Years of real-world experience have made organizations question their ability to achieve a unified business intelligence (BI) platform with both capabilities, as valuable as that may be in the long run. As shown in Figure 1, Enterprise Strategy Group (ESG) research highlights the challenges organizations say they experience with their BI platform. Not surprisingly, data quality and security top the list; nearly half of all organizations surveyed say those two issues represent some of the biggest roadblocks they run into with their BI platform. But other challenges loom large, as well. Complexity, performance, cost, and assured data governance were also cited by about one-third of organizations.²

¹ Source: Enterprise Strategy Group Research Report, [The Evolution of Intelligent Data Management](#), January 2022.

² Source: Enterprise Strategy Group Survey Results, [The Path to Data Leadership: Embracing Business Intelligence and Embedded Analytics](#), July 2021.

Figure 1. Top 10 Business Intelligence Platform Challenges



Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, a division of TechTarget, Inc.

Many of these challenges have a common gating factor: a perceived lack of trust in the data itself, particularly related to several major questions:

- Is it an accurate portrayal of the state of the data at that exact moment in time?
- Does it meet organizational governance standards that result in confidence?
- Does the platform provide granular control of data access and secure centralized storage?
- Can it be used—easily, reliably, and securely—by anyone in the organization, even without advanced training in analytics and data science?

These questions and more represent the central conundrum for organizations looking to bring the flexibility and usability of a self-service model to BI systems that ensure the highest data quality and adhere to the strictest data governance frameworks. While the notion of breaking down BI silos in creating a single, unified BI platform that delivers both self-service and tight data governance is appealing to data scientists, IT professionals, developers, and business users alike, bringing that all together has been a complex, demanding, and often frustrating proposition.

What Organizations Want from Their BI Platform

As BI becomes a more integral, essential, and strategic part of how organizations do business, IT and business leaders alike have gotten used to BI's many benefits and continue to demand even more from their BI systems. Simply put, organizations want the best of both worlds. On one hand, they crave the confidence that comes from strict, enterprise-class data governance so they can be certain that they are accessing and using data that has been properly vetted for accuracy, timeliness, and security. In fact, recent research from Enterprise Strategy Group (ESG) highlights that, of all the priorities that support new and/or ongoing data initiatives over the course of 2023, improving governance, risk, and

compliance (GRC) capabilities and programs matters the most.³ At the same time, organizations also demand the flexibility and user-friendly functionality of a data self-service model. According to ESG research, 85% of organizations indicate that most, if not all, of their users leverage self service to some extent.⁴

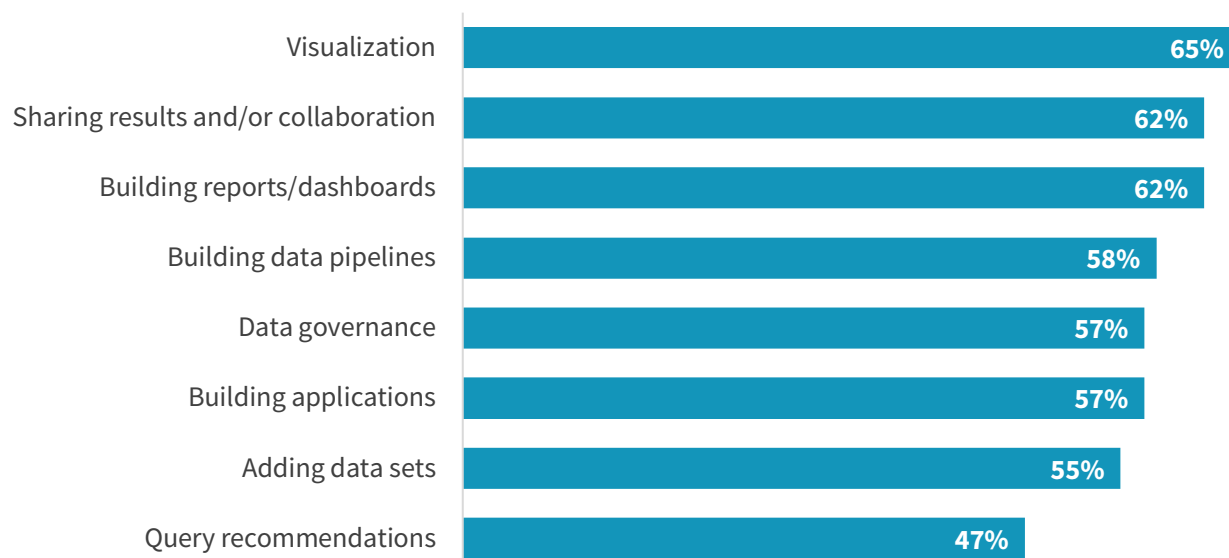
The notion of using data across the whole business is no longer a matter of debate. Organizations have widely recognized that they need both strict governance and easy self service if they are going to empower business users to access and employ analytics tools to make smarter, faster decisions. This is where they come down emphatically on the side of ensuring they have high confidence in the data that they are using according to several guidelines. But it also stresses how much they want that access and usage of critical data to be made as easy as possible so that non-technical users know how best to make use of the data.

For an increasing number of organizations, having a unified approach for data analytics and BI solutions makes a lot of sense, especially if the platform comes with a common, familiar user interface. Also, implementing this in an “open” manner is very important, requiring BI capabilities to be built and accessed without restrictions of proprietary architectures or information silos. Business users, data scientists, and developers all desire the freedom to put applications where they want—on-premises, in the cloud, on the edge, in a specific device or data source, or in a hybrid architecture. They also want the applications to be easily implemented, accessed, and supported.

Without a doubt, this is a demanding ask. As shown in Figure 2, BI users told ESG that they require BI solutions that support a wide range of self-service capabilities. Most organizations surveyed reported that aspects of their BI platform, such as data visualization, easy collaboration, building reports and dashboards, building data pipelines, and providing robust data governance, are all leveraged or will be leveraged by users.⁵

Figure 2. Top BI Self-service Use Cases

What aspects of the business intelligence platform are leveraged or planned to be leveraged by users when it comes to self-service capabilities? (Percent of respondents, N=213, multiple responses accepted)



Source: Enterprise Strategy Group, a division of TechTarget, Inc.

³ Source: Enterprise Strategy Group Research Report, [2023 Technology Spending Intentions Survey](#), November 2022.

⁴ Source: Enterprise Strategy Group Survey Results, [The Path to Data Leadership: Embracing Business Intelligence and Embedded Analytics](#), July 2021.

⁵ Ibid.

As a result, organizations have continued to search—in vain—for a solution that brings together governance and self service in a tightly architected solution. But the sheer weight of the potential benefits of such a solution has finally resulted in a neatly designed, well-orchestrated, unified BI tool from a leading, reliable source: Google’s Looker BI platform.

The Unification of Looker and Looker Studio

Looker has long been considered a reliable, trusted tool that delivers enterprise-class data governance. At the same time, Google Cloud had another tool—Data Studio—which gave business users lacking in-depth data science knowledge the ability to easily create flexible, tailored reports using a self-service model. Over time, Google recognized that organizations were searching for a technology partner to bring together a comprehensive, unified BI platform that embraced enterprise-class governance and business user-centric self service. This resulted in Google previewing a Looker connection to Data Studio for several months as a way of demonstrating Looker’s capabilities. After positive feedback from customers, Google has rebranded this solution as Looker Studio.

By combining enterprise-level governance represented by Looker with the self-service flexibility and ease of use of Looker Studio, Google Cloud now offers customers a tightly integrated solution in a unified platform. Looker Studio embodies several key concepts organizations have been clamoring for over the past decade. These include fast easy access to data and a trusted, accurate, timely, and validated data set, resulting in the ultimate goal sought by most organizations: a single, shared source of truth, as well as granular control of data access and centralized, secure data storage.

Looker customers using the Looker Studio connector benefit from a customer-loved user experience, familiar interface, and ability to integrate data from other sources, such as Google Sheets, Ads, or JDBC databases. Customers get access to enterprise-class functionality, such as single source of truth, developer workflows, and APIs for application development and integration. This significantly broadens the potential use cases for governance, analytics, and self service, all in a unified platform.

Looker Studio is engineered as an open BI platform that eliminates previous data silos in support of analytics, BI, and machine learning. This approach is very similar to what Google did when it first integrated Looker and its BigQuery data warehouse, enabling better integrations and exposure to Google’s large and growing number of services, software, and partners in its massive ecosystem. These integrations allow other technology tools to be easily integrated into Looker Studio to provide even more value for data scientists and data-savvy business users. For organizations that need even more functionality, Google has introduced Looker Studio Pro. This version initially offers even more robust and functional management features, as well as team collaboration and service-level agreements.

The Bigger Truth

For years, organizations have been forced into a corner when it comes to using enterprise data for better business outcomes. On one hand, they have adopted more stringent data governance policies designed to promote confidence and trust that data was being used appropriately, while on the other hand, they needed to empower their business users with essential data to help them make decisions more quickly. Those tradeoffs have not been easy to make, and the results have often been messy and inefficient.

Now, as an important first step toward unifying governed BI and data analytics with flexible self-service data access, Google is helping make its much-discussed holistic and comprehensive view of data, analytics, and AI a reality. By adding enterprise-class features to Looker Studio, Google has made it easier for data professionals and rank-and-file business users alike to achieve the confidence that data usage is tightly governed and is readily available in a self-service format.

This move makes sense in that it is a big step forward toward Google’s original goal of making the Data Cloud narrative believable for organizations, while at the same time demonstrating substantial economic and operational value. The

combination of Looker’s enterprise features, including security and management services with a user-friendly interface and self-service analytics, creates a unique opportunity for organizations to use data more confidently for more innovative business solutions.

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