Roambi, far more intelligent than simply roaming Business Intelligence

Roambi offers a window into your business intelligence world through a tablet, smartphone or phablet. Specifically designed for the mobile user, it accesses existing databases with applets that extract and process BI data, to create striking visualisations for 'Big Data' applications. Its key selling points include a far better data access and display without a major time or resource investment and a much better user experience than the current alternatives.

Those apps, some available from Apple's App Store, are supported on the iPhone, iPad Mini and iPad. There are two key apps. First is the Roambi Analytics App. It provides an Excel-like spreadsheet with graphs and tables for data. Second is the Roambi Flow App that lets users create reports with text and graphics easily on an iPad, a little like a Word application but built to handle BI data.

Roambi

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Roambi will create these sophisticated displays of business information for data residing in an application file such as Excel, or on SaaS services, but more usually on a corporate BI system using Cognos, Business Objects, Oracle, SAP, salesforce.com, or Microsoft Office SharePoint, etc.

The hot news is just-announced Java database connectivity (JDBC) for content portals, BI systems and databases. The analytics app can combine data from multiple sources into one Roambi report – including DB2, Hive/Apache Hadoop, Teradata, MySQL, Amazon Redshift, PostgreSQL, Microsoft SQL, or SAP, etc.

The basic architecture is an application for access, display and report-building resident on the mobile device. It extracts data from a variety of data servers, while linked via a cellular mobile data service.

Monetised offerings include application software for handset devices or as SaaS. Offerings cover the four major customer types: large corporations – Roambi's Analytics and Flow App, a mid-market SaaS offering – Roambi Lite, a small business offering – Roambi Pro, SaaS – used by 5000 SMBs, and a customer-installed version – Roambi ES Server – which can send BI data to any authorised user in range. In addition there is a widely used free app version for a single user.

Major customers include Vodafone, Novartis, Dow Corning, the municipality of Washington, DC, Sydney Airport, Telefonica Germany and the South African Census Bureau – who use the free app version as a public window for their findings. In addition, 8 out of the top 10 global pharmaceutical companies use Roambi. In the USA, over 100,000 professionals use the free app version.

Despite its Fortune 500 success, the founding company behind Roambi, MeLLmo, remains small with 160 staff, is backed by Sequoia Capital, and led by Santiago Becerra.

Here comes the clever bit

Forming a report on a tablet today is difficult once one seeks to move beyond simply pasting in graphics to leverage and manipulate real details like fonts, margins, colours, graphics creation, video insertion, etc. The real need is for a set of user interactions specifically designed for working on multiple documents simultaneously using a touch screen without a keyboard.

And, there lies the real value of what Roambi has and why it is worth trying out. Its UI for building a BI information display uses interface metaphors embedded in the app. The gestural and smartphone metaphors are what make everything work. This UI has all the elements of a whole new style of human interface. It is the culmination of several years' work by a research team grounded in data visualisation, transferred to a new user interface that detects touch and gestures – the Apple iOS and its UI module.

Well, you may well say, this is all jolly interesting – but really so what?

The really interesting part comes when you start to apply these interface metaphors to far more than the BI market, and specifically in the much larger segment of office productivity tools, such as mundane word processing, spreadsheets and slide presentations – ie text with graphics. This is where it could start to make a big difference to the utility (and sales) of tablets and smartphones.

Such an interface toolset solves the main problem facing anyone selling tablets and/or smart phones, including Apple and Microsoft. The problem is that today's professional office applications are incapable of doing the job when it comes to a purely visual and gestural device such as a phablet/smartphone. This is also why today's tablets/smartphones are used far more as content consumption devices than document creation devices, especially by the ordinary mobile-office worker. They remain too difficult to use for efficient document production all day, every day.

The Final Word

The big question comes to: Will Roambi manage the great leap forward to let a thousand "visualisation flowers grow" before one of its potential competitors, e.g. Apple[1], is able to pull it off? (Now, we recognize that Apple is a key partner, providing the tablet/smartphone platform for the BI product set. Yet, in our view, it will be most interesting to see how that relationship evolves with this potential for development on the user interface side.)

In any case, whether it is Roambi or some other competitor, we can expect the imminent arrival of a new generation of user interfaces designed for creation of working documents on the tablet – moving on from only content consumption. Such a new interface means rethinking those office productivity applications completely – something nobody has really done since Xerox PARC designed its Star Office system and Steve Jobs was let in to see it working with its GUI and WIMPS!

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[1] Or, a similar scale player.

In our opinion, moving forward in this key space of a new human interface for productivity applications depends on the depth of skills in visualisation, originality in thinking about the user environment and experience with such interfaces within the company. And Roambi certainly has assembled one of the most talented teams in this field that we have seen. This could well put Roambi in a first mover position, and well able to set the standards for the future market.

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About Ptak, Noel & Associates LLC
We help IT organizations become "solution initiators" in using IT management technology to resolve business problems. We do that by translating vendor strategy & deliverables into a business context that is communicable and actionable by the IT manager, and by helping our clients understand how other IT organizations are effectively implementing solutions with their business counterparts. Our customers recognize the meaningful breadth and objectively of our research in IT management technology and process.

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About the Authors

Simon Forge applies over 30 years experience in information industries to his current projects in telecommunications and computing, specifically exploring new software, wireless and computing technologies and potential futures, outcomes and strategies for markets, products, companies, countries and regions. Previously Simon was Director of IT Development for Consumer and Business Products for Hutchison 3G UK, managing creation of software applications for the latest mobile products, covering the whole range of multimedia apps. In former positions, he managed a wide range of teams and assignments – from acting as interim Director of IT development for the largest utility in the UK to developing one of the largest B2B e-commerce trading systems in Europe. Forge has a PhD, in digital signal processing, as well as MSc and BSc in Control Engineering, all from the University of Sussex, UK. He is a Chartered Engineer and M.IEE and sits on the editorial board of the Journal Info.

Richard Ptak has over 30 years' of experience in systems product management working closely with Fortune 50 companies in developing product direction and strategies at a global level. Previously Ptak held positions as senior vice president at Hurwitz Group and D.H. Brown Associates. Earlier in his career he held engineering and marketing management positions with Western Electric - Manufacturing and Digital Equipment Corporation in the United States and Europe. He is frequently quoted in major business and trade press. Ptak holds a master's in business administration from the University of Chicago and a master of science in engineering from Kansas State University.