When selecting reporting technologies, it is important to understand the applications and users they were designed to serve. The assumptions and technical decisions made by vendors shape the capabilities, performance, reliability and scalability of their products—and clearly reveal that reporting technologies are not all created equal.
Target Applications

Traditional Business Intelligence (BI) tools are designed to help self-sufficient power users to access, massage and present information to management. In contrast, as an Enterprise Reporting platform, Actuate is designed to:

- Deliver self service, zero-training information that is adopted by 100% of employees, customers and partners
- Provide regular and on-demand reports to managers from a single unified platform and server so they can make the right decisions at the right time
- Streamline financial, operational and customer interaction processes with up-to-the-moment information to slash costs and improve customer satisfaction

Information Consumers and Producers

Today’s BI technologies were built to serve the needs of power users who comprise less than 5% of the enterprise. These BI tools address the needs of external audiences poorly or not at all. Instead of supporting hundreds of users, Actuate Enterprise Reporting applications can serve up to hundreds of thousands of users including employees, customers and partners.

BI tools are designed for power users to write reports after completing significant training, which has limited the widespread adoption of these technologies across the enterprise. Actuate provides skill-specific, object-oriented development environments operating over a robust and scalable common infrastructure. This supports a wide range of information producers—from novices to experts—to create highly interactive, instantly usable, web-based reports, reporting applications and live Excel spreadsheets.

Dependable, Robust Performance

As organizations expand their use of mission-critical reporting applications for large user populations, dependability and high performance become crucial business requirements. While BI tools can provide respectable response rates for their small audiences, Actuate iServer delivers high performance to any size community of employees, customers and partners using Enterprise Reporting applications. This requirement is particularly crucial in external applications such as information and customer service portals, for which users have extremely high performance expectations.

High Availability

Since Enterprise Reporting applications serve all users in an enterprise with mission-critical information, they must deliver easy-to-manage, dependable, 24x7 availability. Traditional BI technologies are designed for nine-to-five research and analysis functions and therefore they do need to include industrial-strength architectures that deliver high availability. In stark contrast, Actuate iServer offers load-balanced, J2EE server clusters with no single point-of-failure, and failover safeguards to ensure user requests are always routed to an available server with the lightest computing load.

Near-Linear Scalability

A cost-effective Enterprise Reporting solution enables organizations to add server hardware and enjoy a proportional increase in the size of the user community they can serve while maintaining acceptable performance. While Actuate’s clustered-server J2EE architecture supports near linear scalability for enterprise-wide application deployment, traditional BI technologies support only small user audiences and lose regularly in scalability benchmarks. Actuate is the only vendor to provide comprehensive disclosure of all benchmarking processes, results and conclusions.
Comprehensive Data Access

An Enterprise Reporting solution must be able to access a variety of real-time data sources including relational databases, enterprise applications, flat files and legacy systems. Traditional Business Intelligence technologies are built around a data warehouse, which adds ETL complexities and storage of non-real-time data. Actuate accesses and updates a wide variety of real-time enterprise data sources via its Information Objects metadata.

Flexible, Open Source Alternative

Open-source strategies have become an important part of the development strategies of many large organizations. The Eclipse Foundation leads the way with 65% of organizations claiming use or awareness of Eclipse as an open-source solution, more than three times any other alternative. Actuate remains the only reporting software vendor with an open source strategy, with its BIRT (Business Intelligence and Reporting Tools) software, which includes tools for developing web and spreadsheet reports. Actuate also offers customers a commercial version of BIRT that delivers support, maintenance and software license indemnification.

Language and Localization

As web deployment extends the audience for reporting applications across international boundaries, support for local languages, currencies and syntax becomes crucial. Actuate’s built-in Unicode and localization support allows organizations to develop a report once for any number of languages and countries.

Collaborative Reporting Architecture

Actuate Collaborative Reporting Architecture creates a Business Intelligence Environment never before available by blending:

- Open-source technologies from the BIRT project
- Scalability, performance and reliability of the Actuate iServer
- The interactivity of AJAX (Asynchronous JavaScript and XML)

The result is dynamic, interactive enterprise reports for any type of deployment and an ad-hoc web reporting environment that allows end-users and IT to collaborate and iterate on report definitions, effortlessly evolve report designs, and dynamically craft interactive web reports. This effectively brings both open source technology and principles such as participation, iterative development and modularity to work inside the enterprise to drive information adoption and corporate performance.
**Business Objects XI**

Release 2 of Business Objects XI includes reporting, query, analysis, performance management and data integration.

**STRENGTHS**
- Complete set of functionality spread across product suite
- Data Integrator and metadata access multiple sources

**WEAKNESSES**
- Must design data-cube Universe before creating any reports.
- Universe maintenance may cause high TCO, and low user adoption.
- No object-orientation leads to lots of reports to maintain
- Limited ability to adjust appearance of report templates
- Difficult to create complex reports
- Limited server APIs and no report encyclopedia
- Single-threaded server could lead to poor performance and limit scalability
- No auto-archiving, report versioning or online backups
- No active viewing features such as page-level security, demand paging or progressive viewing
- No automated Excel spreadsheet generation or live charts
- Products originate from separate architectures may be very expensive to acquire and maintain

**Cognos ReportNet**

ReportNet (Cognos Query and Report Studios) is a high-quality ad hoc query, analytics and reporting tool aimed at power users, and competes with Business Objects’ WebIntelligence.

**STRENGTHS**
- Good ad hoc reporting capabilities for power users
- Good solution for small, internal analysis projects

**WEAKNESSES**
- Requires extensive training for end-users
- Capabilities too limited for IT developers
- Weak published performance benchmarks
- Bursts reports into many small, hard-to-manage pages
- Server-generated spreadsheets have limited functionality
- Minimal output search, navigation and view capabilities
- High TCO due to hardware and user-based license costs
- No open-source strategy
Information Builders
WebFocus

WebFocus is an integrated, web-based BI platform with strong data access and scalability but weak report-design functionality and very limited support for end users.

STRENGTHS
- EDA middleware connects to wide variety of data sources.
- Creates, consumes and publishes Web Services
- Distribute reports via web, email, and mobile devices
- Report wizard and associated templates

WEAKNESSES
- Database training required to create ad hoc reports
- Extending apps requires proprietary 4GL programming
- Limited support for print- and presentation-quality reports
- Spreadsheet reports not fully functional; no spreadsheet designer
- Limited page-, section-, report- or file-level security
- Maintenance could require extensive changes to each report
- Customization, personalization and embedding difficult
- Report development restricted to IT and power users
- No on-demand paging; long waits to view long reports
- No open-source strategy

MicroStrategy

Like Actuate, MicroStrategy markets an enterprise BI platform, targeting the five types of BI, which include Scorecards & Dashboards; Enterprise Reporting; OLAP Analysis; Advanced and Predictive Analysis; and Alerts and Notifications.

STRENGTHS
- All five business intelligence types run off their unified architectural foundation and common metadata layer
- Supports data delivery through Web Browsers, MS Office, Desktop Client
- Server runs on Windows, UNIX or Linux

WEAKNESSES
- Time to deploy is large as data warehouse and cubes must be created before reports can be designed and deployed
- Bad data warehouse design can have performance implications
- Limited flexibility to adapt to changing environments and requirements
- TCO may be high for end user population
- Limited scalability; MicroStrategy does not certify on more than four nodes in a cluster
- Data from multiple data sources must be loaded into the data warehouse before it can be reported upon
- Maintenance of metadata later requires time and is expensive
- No out of the box end user functionality
- Limited support for casual users
- No live spreadsheets, only simple data dump to Excel
- No open-source offering or strategy