



BBBT Podcast Transcript



About the BBBT

The Boulder Business Intelligence Brain Trust, or BBBT, was founded in 2006 by Claudia Imhoff. Its mission is to leverage business intelligence for industry vendors, for its members, who are independent analysts and experts, and for its subscribers, who are practitioners. To accomplish this mission, the BBBT provides a variety of services, centered around vendor presentations.

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Claudia Imhoff: Hello, and welcome to this edition of the Boulder BI Brain Trust, or the BBBT. We're a gathering of international consultants, analysts, and experts in business intelligence, who meet with interesting and innovative BI companies here in beautiful Boulder, Colorado. We not only get briefed on the latest news and releases, but we share our ideas with the vendor on where the BI industry is going, and help them with their technological directions and marketing messages. I'm Claudia Imhoff and the BBBT podcasts are produced by my company, Intelligent Solutions.

I'm pleased to introduce my guest today. He is my good friend, Michael Whitehead. Michael is the founder and CEO for WhereScape, all the way from New Zealand. Welcome, Michael.

Michael Whitehead: Thanks. It's fantastic to be back in Boulder again.

CI: I love having you here. You're just such a good speaker, such an inspirational person. Let's talk about something that was inspirational. That was a case study that you brought. You started off with Tesco as a case study. Tell us about that a little bit.

MW: Sure. We've just been at Teradata Partners in Nashville. One of the really great stories that was spoken about there was Tesco. Tesco is the second largest retailer on the planet, second only to Walmart.

CI: Wow!

MW: Not so well-known in America, but very well-known in Britain and Europe and through Asia. In a lot of ways, it was an inspiring talk that they gave at Partners. Just about the importance of data and the importance of keeping your data warehouse and your data systems up-to-date and actually delivering on business value.

That's really hard. You have to keep renovating and changing it. You have to keep up-to-date. You have to move really fast, because businesses change and move fast. I thought it was a good place to start the presentation today.



CI: Yeah. It was a good one. Their solution was to renovate. It wasn't just to buy bigger boxes. It was to actually re-invent, if you will, their environment basically.

MW: Yeah. It's always tempting to buy more hardware and just go, "We can solve the problem by speeding..."

CI: Throwing more tech at it.

MW: Yeah, just speeding it up. It does cover a lot of sins, that's for sure. At some point, you actually have to fix real problems. The issue you've got with a lot of data systems out there, is the whole lot needs changing.

You virtually need to put a new roof on at the same time that you're changing the foundations of the place, and that's difficult. It's hard to do. The answer that Tesco had was to rebuild, but rebuild in modules, and deliver value very rapidly but incrementally. It's a good way to keep people on side and renovate at the same time.

CI: Yeah. Which leads us to kind of the goals that you talked about. It was quite a philosophical session today which I really like, a little bit different. I think that the direction of WhereScape is sort of oriented around these goals. One was data gathering, another one was sense-making, and the last one was action-taking.

I thought at the end of the slide where you had these up there, you also said that, "Therefore, good data matters." It was to me a very refreshing message with all of the hype around the newer technologies, and that sort of thing, or just dump it into this database or into this technology and you don't need to worry about gathering the data or making sense of it or having high quality even.

It was refreshing to see that kind of a statement from you. I'm going to ask you to go ahead and walk through these three, the data gathering, sense-making, and action-taking. Tell us what you meant by that.

MW: Sure. If I start at the end, the whole reason we should be building data systems is to actually achieve something.

CI: To do something!



MW: Yeah! To add some value, to make a difference. We want better data than we had yesterday. We want better data than our competitors have today. If we can get that, and do something with it, then that's the game. That's achieving something. There's a lot of sort of focus on the other parts of it which are really important, but they're only building blocks to get there, only steps on the way. In the sense-making side, there's a lot of talk about analytics, and beautiful graphics...

CI: Visualization.

MW: Visualization! Yeah. Don't get me wrong, it's really important. It's really nice. It does make a difference but only if you do something with it. It's not just about sense making. It's surely not just about data gathering. We are predominantly in the data integration game. That's why we think data is really, really important. The focus on gathering is not healthy.

CI: Well, focus as an end. It's the not the end. It's a means to the ultimate end.

MW: Absolutely. That's also, in our opinion, it's a very solid building block there which goes against some of the current trends of not worrying about structuring data, not worrying about data in any way. Just put it in a great big pile, and other people will sort that out.

The reason we got into data warehousing in the beginning was that, "Let's sort it out once for everyone, so that everyone doesn't have to sort it out themselves." I accept that we may have gone too far down that track in sorting data that don't need sorting.

Maybe, we should just sort data out before people come and look at it, like tidying your house before visitors come in. You don't necessarily keep it perfectly tidy all the time. That's OK. IT people need to loosen up a little bit on what is important. In my opinion, it still is important to put some structure, put some sense around it, and actually treat data as valuable.

CI: These have been the foundations, the blocks that we have built business intelligence upon. They didn't go away just because we have new technology or new ways of doing things. These are fundamental building blocks, are they not?



MW: Yes. But that gets missed a lot of the time as some new, exciting, shiny technology that comes along. That becomes the focus of, "Wow, I've got to get me some of that..."

CI: Fill in the blank. Yeah.

MW: That becomes the focused part of it. But it's really important to remember the first principles, which is all about, what are we trying to do? How are we going to value out of that? How are we going to achieve that? There's a lot of thought, a lot of learning that's gone into the years to make it better. It's right. We can vary that, we can change it, but some of the philosophies, the base philosophies are correct and have stood the test of time.

CI: Yeah. They really have. It was interesting today you went through kind of a history lesson of BIs. It was fun to romp back through the last 30 years or so. Some of it I actually lived through, so it was kind of interesting.

Along the way though you did make a number of controversial statements, I guess and I'm going to pick on just one of them, because I thought it was one of the more interesting observations that you made. That was the statement that data scientists, de-democratized BI, which is not something you hear very often. What did you mean by that?

MW: By anointing someone or a class of people to be data scientists, we're implying that they're special and they're different, and everything that goes with scientists, the white coat, the years of training, the pointy heads, the smarter-than-rest-of-us part of it.

CI: Kind of image.

MW: Yeah. We're basically saying that data has to be interacted with by scientists. It's going back to that high priest style of thing where only certain people are allowed to interact with that special data. The rest of us are not worthy. The rest of us have to go and seek permission. It's sort of dangerous if we get loose with this power.

In some ways, I celebrate the fact that universities are training people in data science. It's becoming a thing. It's becoming talked about as



important. Let's not put it on a pedestal. Data decisions are made everywhere within organizations. Data has to go to lots of people. I can make a better decision from any structure inside the organization, from the very top to the very bottom. It's not about just a data scientist.

CI: I would agree with you to a certain extent. Certainly, there are different communities of business users. One of them can be this data science with the hardcore math skills, and statistical skills, and so forth.

You're right. Even the customer service rep has to make a decision. They should have access to information, if not analytics, maybe it's KPIs, maybe they're simple analytics, but they need to have access to that information so that they can make a sound decision. And that just is pervasive, should be pervasive, throughout the organization. Is that kind of what where you're going with this?

MW: Yeah. I think it's always been the case. There's always been different uses of data or at different levels of summarization, and different guard rails around it. I certainly think one of the things that IT and BI people have done is maybe put too many guard rails around some parts of it.

Some people can be trusted with raw data. They can be allowed to go, and do very, very big queries. I think that is some of the really good things happening in our industry. Some of the technologies that do enable people to operate at a different level, and try and find out some interesting things from huge amounts of data, and new technologies that are much, much cheaper and perform much, much faster, that's really good.

Let's not make it to a set of people that can or a set of people that can't, the have and have-nots. We don't need to do that. We don't need to divide between people that have data and people that don't have data.

CI: Should not have BI elitism, I guess.

MW: Yeah.

CI: Again, just like not everybody is a data scientist, self-service BI is not for everybody either. As you said, you do have to have a certain savvy, you



do have to have a certain knowledge about the data, and how you should and should not use. And again all of that is dependent on the audience that you're talking about, the business community that you're dealing with.

MW: Self-service BI, in some ways, is almost the opposite of the data science metaphor.

CI: The elitist.

MW: Yeah. There are cautions there as well. Self-service BI doesn't mean absolutely no governance and...

CI: Anarchy.

MW: And anarchy around there. Again, you go back to the central tenets of enterprise data that let's apply a standardized set of business rules and let's call something the same thing. The number that appears in your report has to be supported somewhere.

It can't just be plucked out of a self-service BI through 37 levels of spreadsheet. That's bad governance. People go to prison on that. It's the right touch of IT. It's not too light, not too heavy, but to facilitate it, which is what we always should have been doing.

CI: Yeah. That gets to the next question. We got about a couple of minutes left. Renewing that faith, renewing the faith in these are the building foundations, these are the foundational blocks, if you will, and so forth.

These grand ideas, that we started with 25, 30 years ago, how do we renew that faith in this world of self-service BI, and data priests, and hadoop, and just dump the data into the swamp and somebody will sort it out.

MW: I think it's going back to first principles. It's going back to the things that were right then and right now. Data is important. People with better data will more often than not make better decisions than people with worse data.



You're just upping the odds. You have good data about what's happened in Vegas, you have a better chance in someone that doesn't know anything about it. Those things are right. It's how do we apply those best practices and principles to the new world that we're in? Because it is changing.

We do need to adapt. We do need to go, "Wow, there's more indifferent and interesting data around it." It's a matter of keeping relevant and doing the right things, while not rushing off and doing the things that are necessarily exciting, new, and shiny. It's like new friends and old friends. It's just that a new friend doesn't have to replace the old friend. They're both important.

CI: They are both important. Let's end. We got about a minute. Let's end on this last thought. You talked about kind of again the directions of where WhereScape is going and so forth. You talked about what happens if we lose control.

A lot of it has to do with losing control over different aspects of BI environment. For example, the data utility, the ability, as you put it, to integrate the data, to handle the data, clean it up where it needs to be, govern it where it needs to be, let it go where it doesn't need to be.

There was also the idea of some kind of a hub. We got to stick it somewhere. Finally, it is more than just a data warehouse. We do have an ecosystem with multiple components. You could say logically we have one big thing, but we don't, physically. It's a bunch of components, but what if we lose control over them as well, what happens then?

MW: I think control is an interesting word there that central IT and BI teams have been accused of having too much control.

CI: A little too tight a grip.

MW: Yeah. Therefore, with control there comes a cost and expense in time, and all these, and governance.

CI: Inflexibility, and rigidity.



MW: Yeah. I look at some of the answers we're coming up with today are almost like just throw our hands up and walk away from it. Let's forget about all that stuff. Put it in a spot here. You can just sort it out whenever you want.

In some ways, it's quite a nice thing, because you don't have to take responsibility for it anymore. I just put the data there, someone else did it all. You do run this very, very real risk and break some of those first principles of sorting things out, and applying things once, and doing it once for everyone. If people are coming up...

CI: Inconsistencies, chaos, unreliable environments. Yeah, I would agree.

MW: The trick is where you see it is to come up with the ability to provide the level of governance, the level of control, the level of strategy, that is the right level, but also done in such way that you're not actually paying for it.

No one wants to pay for this stuff. Everyone wants a stable environment and a stable government. No one wants to pay taxes. No one wants to do that. I don't care if you're on the left or the right. How do we do that? Can we do that in such a way that as you're doing your daily work, things are just happening around you.

There are a lot of concepts that we put into the WhereScape products. How do we deliver to you the right level of governance without you paying for that? We do tricks like, If we give you a place where you can develop really, really rapidly and you want to go there because it's the fastest way to develop. We'll hopefully make that an attractive place for you to go. Oh, by the way, as you're developing, we can do all the governance stuff on the outside that you don't even see. We can write metadata about everything you're doing.

Why is that good? It means we can document it at any point. We can give you impact analysis. We can tell you what's going to happen if you're going to make some changes around it. You're not paying for it. You're not having to do that. You're not having to stop and spend three weeks writing documentation. We can do that for you. It's all about just making it attractive to pay taxes.



CI: As if it's ever. It's true. It's painless at that point. I think WhereScape data warehouse automation is something that is so critically important to these environments. In my opinion, everyone should have that kind of capability.

MW: We need to reduce the cost, while not reducing the level of governance and the level of strategy. Let's reduce the cost, reduce the time that it takes to do that. In every industry on the planet, people look to automate those things.

Automation doesn't mean replacing jobs. It doesn't mean getting rid of people. It means reducing the costs. It was so much work to do. We still need a lot of people to do it. It's not about getting rid of jobs. It's about being smarter and doing more.

CI: Yeah. I couldn't have said it better. On that note I think we'll end. So again that's it for this edition of the BBBT Podcast. I'm Claudia Imhoff and it's been such a pleasure to speak with Michael Whitehead of WhereScape today. Thanks so much.

MW: Thank you.

CI: I hope you enjoyed today's podcast. You'll find more podcasts from other vendors at our web site www.bbbt.us. If you want to read more about today's session, please search for our hash tag on Twitter. That's #BBBT. And please join me again for another interview. Good bye and good business!