



## BBBT Podcast Transcript



### About the BBT

The Boulder Business Intelligence Brain Trust, or BBT, 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 BBT provides a variety of services, centered around vendor presentations.

For more, see: [www.bbbt.us](http://www.bbbt.us).

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| <b>Vendor:</b>        | <b>Alation</b>   |
| <b>Date recorded:</b> | <b>June 5, 2015</b>  |
| <b>Host:</b>          | <b>Claudia Imhoff</b> , President, BBT   |
| <b>Guest(s):</b>      | <b>Satyen Sangani</b> , CEO<br><b>Anand Aidasani</b> , Customer Development Lead |
| <b>Run time:</b>      | <b>00:16:09</b>  |
| <b>Audio link:</b>    | <a href="#">Podcast</a>  |
| <b>Transcript:</b>    | [See next page]  |



---

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 guests today. They are Satyen Sangani and Anand Aidasani. Satyen is the CEO and Anand is the Customer Development Lead for Alation. Welcome to you both.

Satyen Sangani: Thank you.

Anand Aidasani: Thank you.

CI: Satyen, let's start with you. Alation is a relatively new company. It's been around for what about two or three years now I guess. Why don't you tell me a little bit about Alation, who the founders are and a few other topics.

SS: Yeah, absolutely. Alation was founded just under about three years ago. We've been in "stealth mode" for a large period of that time. We were doing that, you know really working with customers, learning from them, building out against their use cases. Customers like eBay and Square and certain top financial institutions.

We've built the company based upon a really incredible team. I think I'm fortunate to work with some amazing people, like Anand. The co-founding team includes two PhDs from Google who are researchers in data quality, data mining and search. Also some amazing designers out of places like Apple.

We really have worked to build a product that is crafted and that people care about and love and that our customers love. We've tried to do that and we've then, in the last couple of months at the end of March, come out of stealth and have allowed our customers to tell the stories, as to what they're doing with our software and why it's useful to them.



---

CI: I love the name of the company. Please tell us what it means.

SS: Sure. Alation means the state of having wings. It's an aspirational name. It's a name that we think allows our customers to get to a certain state. Much more importantly, it's so we have something to aspire to as we build out for our customers. It gives us something to learn to live by.

CI: Higher and higher. Let's talk about your customers a little bit. You gave us a slide on what a typical customer kind of life cycle is like and also what data literacy is all about. That's kind of the premise for your product. Why don't we start there? Typical customer, what is the life cycle there and what does it mean to be data literate?

SS: The basic point is that there is all of this information, much of it in the form of data inside of an enterprise. The reality is that we need people to be able to access this information, use this information and learn about this information faster. I think all of us believe, in the data community, that we want people to get answers faster.

But to be able to get answers faster you need context around the information. You need to be able to know where the thing came from and why it exists and who produced it and whether it actually answers the question that you have. For us, data literacy is really all about having that context. The context to find the data when you need it, the context to understand the data once you've found it and once you've understood the data to use it in the way that you need to.

That encompasses a lot of different things from who's using the data to where it came from to technically how to write a query. We talk about a lot of those things, most of those things, but it's really surrounding the data with insight and context so that you can absorb and use the data better, faster, stronger.

CI: Anand, let me bring you into the conversation. That is the problem that Alation solves, that context information. It's the need of the context to be used by business users, mostly analysts at this point. Basically bottom line you create catalogs, right?



AA: Sure. Actually yeah, we surface a lot of information in the form of a searchable catalog that has a much nicer user interface than doing a select star 10 type of query. When we surface that catalog up, we actually give you a lot of context. If you find a table that you're searching for, which we can find either from the physical name if you've got it or most people search in natural language, we can find that table that way as well.

When you see that, not only do you see what this table is but you see who's using that table and what fields in those tables are used by different sets of those people. Naturally who uses the table the most may not be the same as who uses a certain field the most. That gives you a clue as to whether they're sitting in my division, my unit or not.

Or maybe they're doing the exact same job I do but in a different part of the world. When they find that information, we're able to give them a lot of things to help write that analysis better.

What we really find is like if you think about the way people learn, there are three ways primarily that people will learn: they'll learn either by apprenticeship or doing, following somebody else...And Alation can give you what other people have done in the form of a library of queries that have been done against a certain domain or topic.

You can pick those up and learn from them. We have this neat way to deconstruct a query so you understand how they learned it. There's trial and error. I can write a query either by using skills I already had in the past or learn new skills by using auto-complete in our query building process which really helps things along as well.

Let's say this is a really important query that I'm doing for the CEO of our company. That's something that maybe has a little bit more diligence that I need to do. There's even the way to learn formally through what we call articles but it's effectively an evolution of the way wikis are done today. Where the data objects are tied to the wiki and you can create a very rich story of how do you build this type of analysis around this domain.



CI: It's actually fascinating. The demo that you did, I thought was terrific. You sort of walked us through what a business analyst would do. You showed us how they would use the software to build the query as you mentioned. You start them out with "OK you want to find something or you want to look at something."

You also went through the huge amount of context to help them...Satyen, I think it was your expression that there's a little angel on their shoulder kind of guiding them through, giving them so much information. Tell us just a little bit about what that was all about.

AA: A lot of the stuff that happens...We have changing uses of information. There's a lot of sensitivity around how data is used. Frankly, the more precise our analysis needs to be, the more information we need to get. There are some subtleties to that.

You might find out that this definition of revenue that you're using actually includes taxes maybe. Another column doesn't include taxes. You might actually need to sum those up to come up with a true set of services plus let's say software which is a very common mistake that people make in revenue analysis.

As I would write the query in Alation it would actually give me that context to say "Make sure you take out the taxes. The taxes can be found at this table." You can actually just type taxes in and we've pre-written a filter which basically allows me to not have to worry about how to learn this complex way to back out some data so I can actually compare two things. That's one of the ways that we help do that.

CI: Then other ways you show them the data to begin with. You also give them some statistics about the various attributes of the data, right?

AA: Sure. Actually that's a great point. One of the things that we...We talk about the semantic problem a lot in the BI world, but the semantic problem exists in the world of queries as well. A filter is effectively a slice and that slice and that filter can have many meanings.

I remember working in a large organization where we would define east, west and central region. The definition would change almost every six



months. Even doing comparative analysis over the last three years was an extremely difficult task.

However, with Alation what you can do is keep those definitions consistent centrally, so that when you actually go to write that query or run that query, the semantics are actually accurate to the current state of affairs.

CI: That has been a bane for 20 years in BI... constantly changing dimensions. That's really interesting. I didn't know you guys did that.

Satyen, let me go back to you then because you have other features that I found fascinating as well. Let's talk about those. In particular you've got collaborative analytics, you've got, I think, a very good data optimization and I want you to define what you mean by data optimization. Also governance as well as the articles. We'll get into those again I'm sure.

SS: Yeah. It's funny when we started developing Alation, we developed it as a tool for analysts. We developed it as a tool for analysts so they could consume data better. To the point of the query tool, we said, "Hey, let's just watch how people write these queries. If we study hundreds of people and how they go through the process of building a query, we can learn from them."

What we found is that as we sort of expanded our usage inside of the enterprises that we were selling to, various audiences came in and said, "Hey, me too." We found that data governance professionals were saying, "We need to surface to these same analysts a whole bunch of information about how they should be using the data."

IT professionals came down and said, "We need to be able to tell these analysts how to write an appropriate query so they don't make our database fall over by not including the appropriate filters." On a date, for example, field when they want our query table that has a thousand days of history.

When you think about that, we realize that to describe the data you had to do so from a variety of different perspectives. You needed to have information that was governed coming in from people who are responsible within the organization for data. You need to have information



coming in from the IT audience about how to use the databases. You need to have information from past analysts who have essentially said how they've analyzed the data before.

Giving all that information contextually to either an analyst or even a business user became a coordination problem.

We then built tools for coordinating for the business...those different audiences. Effective data governance is all about helping people, who are in the governance role, document information much more efficiently. They can build business glossaries. They can build data dictionaries. They can build articles to describe the data. They can talk about insights, and they can do so in a way that's easily consumable by that end analyst and business user.

Similarly, we have this notion of data optimization which is, "Look, if I've got hundreds of thousands of tables across many, many databases. Or even thousands of tables across the database how do I know which ones of these are used? Which ones of these should be used? How do I know which ones I need to delete? How do I know who's using what data?"

By analyzing the different systems that we attach to, we can build a catalog that really learns about the information and then gives people in IT the ability to manage these databases better.

That's what we mean by data optimization.

CI: I love that. The fact that you can find redundant tables, redundant queries, inefficient queries and be able to improve the overall performance of the environment is just fascinating.

SS: Yeah, it's really exciting stuff. As we talked about earlier, there's this notion of sort of optimizing the infrastructure but there's also just optimizing the human work flow. If you can find redundant queries, you find two people who are actually asking the same question. If you can put those people together really incredible things can happen. People can learn faster.

CI: Exactly. Let's talk about the people a little bit because that's always kind of a challenge, isn't it?



Now you get a lot of the context from things like data modeling tools or ETL technologies or corporate wikis if they exist. But, you also get a large amount of the context from the individuals, the subject matter, experts, the analysts themselves, putting in their definitions or their comments, if you will.

One of the discussion points we had was how do you get these people to put in their expertise? You're sort of capturing their expertise in your technology. How do you do that? How do you get these people to cough it up?

SS: Yeah. It's so funny. I think one chief data officer at a very large financial institution said to me, "Information management has historically focused on black and white. There's good data and there's bad data. And mostly we're just going to label all the good stuff and we're just going to put iron clad processes around controlling what's good and that's all we're going to manage."

It's very binary and we're controlling a very small set of information because frankly that's all that anybody's capable of controlling, in the context of so much information that's out there. This person had a great observation. He sort of said, "Alation allows me to sort of observe the gray."

Most of the information is actually gray because essentially what it allows me to do is it allows me to say, "Look, by looking at usage patterns, I can see what's black and I can label it as such but I can see what's becoming blacker by usage. I can see what people are actually doing with the information."

By getting some insight into what people are actually doing with the data and by understanding and putting all of the different bits that surround the data, I can start to learn about how to manage my data better.

The way we think about ourselves is really as a place to discover truth.

Now truth may be half discovered, it may be totally discovered, it may be not discovered at all. The goal is really "How do you assemble as much knowledge as there is today to do the good so that people can find what they need and then enhance it as they go along."



CI: I find, at least in my experience, the more people put into the system the more they get out of it, and that makes them want to put even more into it.

SS: Yeah. It's really fun to watch. We've seen that with our customers and it's just so gratifying to see that happen, inside of the tool.

CI: It's a good growth pattern.

Last question, what's the future hold for Alation?

SS: For us, the big thing is really data literacy. How do we allow more people to consume data? How do we allow people to use data more robustly in their business decisions? That means more simplified user interfaces. That means more data cataloged by Alation. That means more sources cataloged by Alation. That means more learning done inside of our tool.

We know what we are and I think it's really just about deepening and broadening the capabilities that we've built at this point in time. We're excited to do that. We have a whole bunch of announcements that we're doing with regards to customers and partners and new features. All of that will come out in due time.

For us, it's really just about allowing people to connect with data. If they can do that, hopefully they can learn faster and if we do that we're pretty successful.

CI: Fascinating.

Unfortunately that's it for this addition of the BBT podcast. Again, I'm Claudia Imhoff, and it's been a pleasure to speak with Satyen Sangani and Anand Aidasani... your names are going to kill me one of these days... of Alation.

Thank you for your patience and thank you for speaking with me today.

SS: Thanks, Claudia.

AA: Thanks a lot, Claudia.



---

Cl: I hope you enjoyed today's podcast. You'll find more podcasts from other vendors at our web site [www.bbbt.us](http://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!