Platforms might be "the new black" for grid analytics, but we've been here before

When I turned 40, a (too long) while ago, I had to accept that I wasn't really one of the "young talents" anymore. So family and insightful friends explained to me that today "40 is the new 30". That did not make me feel much better, but I found that buying an expensive, new mountain bike with a hell of a lot of carbon parts did somewhat ease the pain. The youngsters still destroy me when riding uphill, but hey, they have time to train and at least I have the cool bike! You might be asking yourself what my personal analogy has to do with analytics platforms, let me explain:

If you look back to the old days of traditional analytics, maybe about 30 years ago, you will always see a strong need from business users to get value out of data. But whatever architecture your IT department opted for in order to structure your company's data, an annoying virus started to spread across data-savvy, early-adopter industries: an innumerable quantity of data silos, growing like mushrooms after a rainy day. Plus, lots of small apps sitting on top of those silos, acquired in "stealth mode" by business departments to deliver value in a speedy and flexible way – at least, as promised by their vendors.

Such an app-centric approach was (and still is!) tempting, yet also treacherous. Business value is generated at the app-level (let's call it the north-bound side). But trustworthy results are only achieved if the data loaded into the app is of required quality and consistency (the south-bound side). The risk? You implemented a good-looking product, with some fancy, blinking dashboard, but the meaning of the results is questionable and your figures don't match with those of your neighboring department derived from their own data silo. Ah, sorry: their app.

When the Big Data hype arrived in Utilities, let's say 10-15 years ago, I saw the same disease spreading here, too. Maybe the virus became even more dangerous when recently the Cloud made it easier and cheaper to implement yet another "island app", next to another, next to another.

Meanwhile, another phenomenon has spread: the platform. In order to counter the proliferation of apps, vendor marketing now promises "one platform to underpin one holistic analytics strategy". Unfortunately, all too often, these platforms are narrow, limited products which someone rebranded as a "platform" just last week or so.

Don't get me wrong, I do believe platforms can generate enormous value and help utilities to better control the data chaos by reducing complexity. Both OMNETRIC Group's shareholders, Siemens and Accenture, have invested much into building Siemens Sinalytics and Accenture Insight Platform respectively. And my team has and is developing great analytical apps on these platforms. Nevertheless, I am sure everyone will agree, in any medium and large scale Utility on this planet, you won't find a single, homogenous environment with only one platform. You will find a multi-vendor and multi-platform setup everywhere. So, a single platform approach to drive your analytics strategy is an illusion. What is important though is an open architecture that facilitates integration across the multi-platform landscape.

A successful multi-platform strategy does not just comprise the fun side, i.e. the north-bound application layer, but it needs to take care also of the south-bound layer, which I like to call the "Analytics Enablement Layer". You would think after so many years of traditional analytics we could have finally arrived at a new architecture that breaks with the old-style, one-directional approach? In a modern architecture, analytics needs to be embedded and bi-directional. It should not just exist as a parallel world next to your operational systems to which your data is "pushed out". Only if we remedy this, will you be able – today – to implement central analytics with Big Data, as well as distributed analytics (@ the edge) with "Small Data" – tomorrow. But all too often I have to observe that "the old virus is back"…

Now regarding my concept of the Analytics Enablement Layer (AEL), where and how to get started? Let me use another analogy to better explain: A close friend, an ex-fighter pilot, once explained to me the principle of air-to-air missiles, called "fire & forget": Push the button to start the missile and don't care about it again. It will find its target by itself. Well, sounds like a convenient thing for combat (at least for the firing aircraft, less for the target), but if you want to arrive at a modern architecture, as described above (remember: bi-directional, embedded, real-time, central & decentral, etc.) you really do need to care more, much more. There is no "fire & forget" for data. Your own AEL is a must-have in order to manage a multi-platform, multi-vendor (and multi-legacy-app) ecosystem on-premise and in the cloud.

Sorry to disappoint you, but you will not find any recommendations on how to build your AEL in this blog (and I also do not have a product to sell), but let me post a few ideas:

- Do start with people who are able to navigate today's new era of possibilities to make future-proof (!) decisions.
- Do outsource whatever work makes sense for you, but never outsource "being in the driving seat".
- Don't think apps in the cloud will void the "garbage-in garbage-out" principle.
- Don't expect all of this will come "plug and play" as some might promise.
- Long story short: You – need – to – care.

A crisscross "spaghetti architecture" with numerous whizz-bang, independent apps to which you "fire & forget" your data will not make things easier in the long run. And it will eat up much higher, total budget as well. Putting a lot of apps (some of them renamed as "platforms") into your shopping cart will not make you a "Digital Performer". Just like buying a lot of guitars will not make you play like Mark Knopfler or Gary Moore.

Back to my mountain bike analogy: Buying a new bicycle is a quick win for me, sure, but if I don't want to be overtaken by youngsters all the time, I need to care more: The need to dedicate some more time into training will not go away. But you know, I think I can postpone this effort – it will be easier tomorrow, I'm sure…

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