

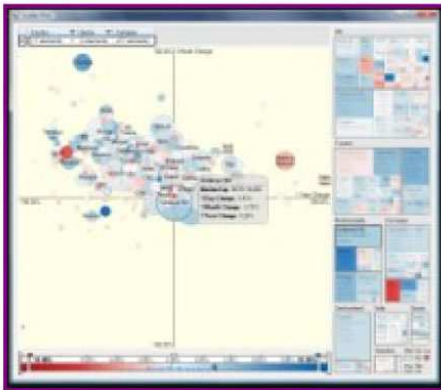


Data Management News:

Do you know where your BI software's data visualization tools come from?

By Jeff Kelly, News Editor
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Not surprisingly then, most innovations in visualization technology over the last several years have come from Tableau and a handful of other visualization specialists, analysts agree. The result is that data visualization has in fact become almost commoditized, with visualization capabilities varying surprisingly little among the top BI vendors because they often get the technology from the same sources, according to Forrester Research's Jim Kobielus.



A Panopticon Software scatter plot. (Click to enlarge image.)

"It's a real shooting war at the top of the BI market," Kobielus said, and vendors know they can't afford to let their visualization capabilities fall behind those of competitors. "The state of the art [in data visualization] has more or less converged on a common set of features and a common approach across many BI vendors."

Most of the major BI vendors – including SAP Business Objects, IBM Cognos, MicroStrategy, SAS Institute, and Information Builders – offer comparable visualization capabilities that include, for example, interactive bar charts, gauges, pie charts and geographic mapping.

That visualization technologies are fairly homogenous among vendors is actually a good thing, however, as it makes it easier for users to move seamlessly between applications and tools yet achieve the same basic understanding of the data, Kobielus said. It obscures the underlying BI platform to a degree, he said, which helps users share and understand BI and data analytics without having to learn a new system or technology every time.

"Visualization is a personal experience, but it's also a collective experience in that we share it with others," Kobielus said. "When I share something I built, the other guy should be able to understand and use it. People can do this when we all share a common visualization paradigm."

In addition to innovating with new ways to consume and share data visualization tools, the data visualization vendors argue that they are also developing new and cutting-edge visualization technology.

Panopticon Software last summer debuted what it calls a horizon graph. It can display data from up to 50 "time series"-based events, one on top of the other, to compare sequences of events, for example. Another tool, called a treemap, displays data as differently shaded and sized boxes, with the color and size of each box reflecting its importance and even whether it is "good" or "bad" news, according to the company.

Panopticon developers are also currently working on new technology that might best be called a recommendation engine. Users input data into the engine, which then recommends the best visualization tool to understand and analyze it, according to Markus Skyttner, the company's CTO.

Both Tableau Software and Panopticon sell directly to enterprise customers in addition to selling their visualization tools to BI vendors to embed in their products. Each company, in fact, estimates that about half of its business is direct to the enterprise.

But whether straight to the enterprise or incorporated into existing BI suites via OEM agreements, visualization technology is all designed with one goal: to make it easier for mere humans to intuitively understand vast quantities of data with just a single look.

As Fink puts it, "Visualization should be an extension of how your brain is thinking."