

What's the word on BPC, BI-IP

Contributed by raji nakkeeran
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SAP's definitive strategy for planning technologies moving forward: What's the word on BPC, BI-IP and SRC?

Ryan Leask

Business Card

Company: Business Objects, an SAP Company

Sorry it has been a while since my last blog. I have wanted to write more frequently, but it has just been an extraordinarily busy time. Not that it is any less busy right now mind you, but I know there is still some confusion around what is happening with BPC and NetWeaver BI Integrated Planning (BI-IP). My last blog I wrote touched on this topic, but this was from before SAP acquired Business Objects, so I want to provide an update, and remedy any confusion there might be, by addressing this topic head on, and letting you know what SAP is "officially" doing. This is a pretty long blog, but I want to try and address all the big concerns out there.

In the most simplistic view, SAP recommends all new planning implementations use SAP BPC. You will find this message in every analyst and press article discussing SAP's planning roadmap - it is THE official statement from SAP on planning. This is a common position of the NetWeaver and Financial Performance Management teams within SAP as you'll see below, so if you hear otherwise from someone, feel free to refer them to this blog. You can see just one example of this in a recent interview conducted by "is report" (the article was published 12th May 2008):

- "In the area of planning we have the strategic product SAP Business Planning and Consolidation". Nenshad Bardoliwalla, VP FPM Solution Management (in response to the question of what are the strategic products SAP has selected going forward).

- "For customers who haven't implemented the tool [BI-IP] yet I recommend considering the advantages of Business Planning and Consolidation". Gerd Danner, VP NetWeaver Product Management

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Well, if it was that easy, I could just stop writing right here. But obviously there are many questions that follow on from this statement, so let me try and address the most common questions or concerns.

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What is happening to BI-IP?

BI-IP is not disappearing and continues to be supported by SAP to 2013 (2016 with extended maintenance). For any customers who are currently implementing BI-IP, SAP recommends you continue on your BI-IP project, and evaluate BPC for your future needs. SAP will continue to invest further in BI-IP as a "planning engine" (or "planning framework"), rather than as a planning toolset as it is today. The idea behind this change is that planning applications from SAP can then be developed on top of the planning engine.

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Does that mean BPC will sit on top of BI-IP in the future?

Firstly, it is important to understand that BPC has a "dual-stack" release strategy. When SAP acquired OutlookSoft, the product ran completely on a Microsoft platform (Windows Operating System; SQL Server; Analysis Services; Reporting Services; DTS/SSIS, etc). SAP is continuing to invest strategically in the Microsoft based version of BPC to maintain our commitment to customers (the official name is "SAP Business Planning and Consolidation, version for the Microsoft platform", but it is sometimes unofficially referred to simply with an "M" suffixed after the release name... e.g. BPC 7.0 M, would refer to version 7.0 of BPC running on the Microsoft platform).

While the Microsoft platform is suitable for many customers, there are also a lot of SAP customers who run NetWeaver BI, and want to leverage their NetWeaver BI system. Therefore, since the acquisition of OutlookSoft, SAP has been working on integrating BPC to the NetWeaver BI platform. The official name for this release is "SAP Business Planning and Consolidation, version for SAP NetWeaver", and is sometimes unofficially referred to with a "NW" suffix, to indicate the NetWeaver based version of BPC (e.g. BPC 7.0 NW). So, there are 2 flavors of BPC - one based purely on Microsoft technology, and the other that is NetWeaver based. Customers can freely pick which platform they prefer, and SAP is continuing to invest in both versions going forward.

Now the dual-stack release strategy is clear, obviously the pure Microsoft based version of BPC will not have any integration to BI-IP. For the first NetWeaver based version of BPC (BPC 7.0 NW), there will be integration to some aspects of the BI-IP engine. For example, BPC leverages the write-back functions and locking engine of BI-IP, and, under some circumstances, it will also use the same functions for reading data out of a cube too. However, to be perfectly clear - while BPC 7.0 NW does use some of the same the core engine components from BI-IP, BPC 7.0 NW does not use, and there are no future plans to use, aggregation levels/filters/queries/etc.

Another important distinction to make is that BPC is, intentionally, not directly integrated into the Enterprise Data Warehouse (EDW), but operates in its own namespace in the NetWeaver BI system. This means that you can't use the BPC client/front-end for reading and writing out of an existing InfoProvider in your system. The reason why this was an intentional design decision, is that if BPC was completely integrated into the EDW, with its shared dimensional model, no business users would ever be able to maintain their own applications (like creating their own dimensions or "characteristics" in NetWeaver BI terms) without impacting the whole EDW. Obviously, no IT department would ever want to allow business users to make changes to the entire EDW. Instead, BPC allows the users to modify the structure of the cube, create their own hierarchies and properties of dimensions (or "attributes of characteristics" in NetWeaver lingo), etc - all from within the BPC application, using a very business-user friendly UI that any business analyst would be comfortable with. In contrast, these types of modeling capabilities are not even available in BI-IP. In BI-IP, you have to go into the NetWeaver BI Administrator Workbench (RSA1) to do any real modeling, because all BI-IP modeling is done "on top of" the cubes. BPC on the other hand directly integrates to the underlying InfoCubes/InfoObjects, etc. So, this design approach actually maximizes the flexibility of the solution AND puts all of this power into the hands of the business without reliance on IT! I have to say, we are pretty proud of this functionality too!

In terms of future integration, SAP continues to evaluate the individual features/functions in releases beyond the upcoming 7.0 and 7.0M releases. That means we will evaluate BI-IP capabilities for future BPC releases, but it is not the intention to have BPC leverage every single feature/function provided in BI-IP as soon as possible. Rather, we will be gathering feedback on the BPC 7.0 NW release, prioritizing any enhancement requests, and then evaluating what we might be able to leverage from BI-IP to fulfill those requirements. One topic that we are strongly evaluating is around leveraging FOX functions in BPC - but if and when this would happen is still being discussed.

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So BPC won't be a new front-end on top of BI-IP?

No. It is not our intention to just make BPC a front-end tool. BPC is a complete planning application that will leverage some of the core engine components from NetWeaver BI and BI-IP, but it will not become just a front end tool.

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But I heard that BPC isn't scalable. Should I choose BI-IP for large deployments?

No, this is not true. There are many customers on the pure Microsoft platform with large deployments of BPC with thousands of users, so it's simply untrue to say that BPC isn't scalable. It is also important to note though the scalability must be evaluated in the context of an application function. BPC is a "Performance Management application" and was never designed to store line item detail - it is not a data warehouse. BPC 7.0 NW will also be available directly on NetWeaver BI in a matter of weeks, and most readers probably already know that the SAP NetWeaver BI platform is highly scalable with many customers publicly lauding its ability to reach Terabyte data volumes (although again it is important to note that regardless of platform, BPC is still not intended to be a data warehouse!). Furthermore, BPC cubes in the NetWeaver BI release will be able to utilize the BI Accelerator to further improve scalability and performance.

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When will BPC 7.0 NetWeaver be available and where can I get more information?

BPC 7.0 NW will be available in Ramp Up at the end of July 2008. Ramp Up's do not go for a fixed period of time at SAP, so a precise General Availability (GA) date is not known, however the initial expected length of a Ramp Up is approximately 6 months. In terms of requirements, BPC 7.0 NW will require NetWeaver BI 7.0 Enhancement Package 1, and BPC will technically be installed as an Add-On to the BI system.

Currently, as the product is still not even in Ramp Up yet, little information has been published on the 7.0 release at this point in time. Obviously, as we get into the Ramp Up, this will change and we will begin releasing much more information (to the Ramp Up customers first). If you or a customer you're working at, is looking to implement BPC this year and wants to go with the NetWeaver version, customers should contact their SAP Account Executive, who can ensure they receive answers to their questions. I am also planning on publishing another blog soon to dispel (or confirm) some of the rumors around what BPC 7.0 NW is and is not, so look for that shortly.

I also want to mention here that there will be a migration tool which supports customers who implement BPC 5.1 now (on the Microsoft platform), and later wish to migrate to the NetWeaver version. Obviously, there are very major architectural differences between the releases, so the migration tools will only be able to automate so much (for example, any custom DTS/SSIS tasks would need to be rebuilt manually), but we have been able to automate a significant portion of the migration. As above, more detailed documentation on the migration tools will be forthcoming closer to the release date.

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Will there be any migration tools to go from BPS or BI-IP to BPC?

Currently, we are still evaluating the feasibility of such a migration. There are major differences in the way these products work, so an automated migration would be very difficult and would not give you any opportunity to leverage a lot of the additional functionality in BPC. So SAP will continue to evaluate providing such tools in the future, but there are no firm plans in place today to develop these migration tools.

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Will BPC allow me to customize a solution as much as I could with BI-IP?

Absolutely. If you wish to do a lot of customization, BPC is an extremely flexible and extensible solution, so you feel totally comfortable that you will be able to tailor the solution to your individual needs. For example, you can create custom stored procedures (or ABAP logic in 7.0 NW) for completely custom planning functions; you create custom ETL tasks (in SSIS in Microsoft, or Process Types in NW); there are exits for custom VBA logic on the front-end; there are API's available completely customized application; and many, many other types of places where you can customize the solution. The great thing about BPC that is so exciting to customers is that end-users don't have to know any of these more technical topics to build an application - they are there if you want them, but you aren't forced to learn them to build powerful applications quickly.

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Why would I want to go with BPC instead of BI-IP?

Every single planning product on the market, no matter which vendor it is from, will have its own set of strengths and weaknesses. So you can try and do a side by side feature/function comparison, and you will find there will be a few features and functions in BI-IP that aren't in BPC, and this should not be a surprise. On the other hand, SAP obviously acquired OutlookSoft because it contained a lot of additional functionality not found in BI-IP/BPS. I know this better than most as I was the person responsible for the functional and technical analysis of OutlookSoft before the acquisition, and I have had a long NetWeaver and SEM background before this so I know all our existing products in detail too. However, doing feature/function comparisons is really missing the strategic value BPC offers. The most important points to consider are:

- SAP is developing and investing heavily into BPC. As I mentioned, BI-IP as an engine will still be invested in, but for creating planning applications, BPC is the product that SAP is investing in heavily, with a large development team and significant go-to-market focus.
- BPC provides integrated Planning, Reporting and Financial Consolidations. SAP is also investing in BPC as both a planning and consolidation product with excellent financial reporting capabilities. That means BPC is uniquely positioned as a unified solution that is capable of both planning and consolidations and financial reporting in a single system. Even if you aren't looking to implement consolidations now, having a single system where you can leverage all of the same master data, metadata, and application artifacts is a huge advantage.
- BPC is administered by Business Experts, not by IT. For any IT owned systems, a very significant pain point for an end user is having to wait for IT to make their requested changes. Because BPC can be maintained by the business, it puts the power back in their hands. This concept is often a hard pill to swallow (at least initially) for IT as it can be a little scary to think of putting this much power into the hands of the business. However, with some reflection, it is evident that if the business doesn't get the changes they want in a timely manner, they just turn to using spreadsheets, and this is much worse! In BPC, the system and data are still centralized, and that gives IT the opportunity to govern and monitor the changes while not becoming a bottleneck during the process. It really is the best of both worlds.
- Fast implementations and best in class usability. BPC really has one of the best user experiences of any product in the market (we will be sure to get some new demos of BPC 7.0 NW onto SDN very soon so you can see this for yourself), and the implementation times for BPC are quite rapid. Faster time to delivery, combined with better usability means happier users and better adoption throughout the business.
- Integration to FPM (Financial Performance Management) suite and Business Objects BI. The 7.0 releases will contain new functionality and the NetWeaver BI integration, but in the future, SAP is also integrating BPC into the overall FPM suite of products (including Strategy Management and Profitability and Cost Management), and the Business Objects BI toolsets.
- Customers continue to validate SAP BPC is the right choice. Everyday we are seeing an unbelievable amount of interest in BPC. There are many independent analysts validating the strategy to go forward with BPC, and we are seeing

customers are constantly selecting it as their solution of choice: "SAP reported that over the past several months more than 100 customers worldwide purchased SAP® solutions for enterprise performance management with the intention to replace Hyperion solutions from Oracle." <http://www.sap.com/usa/company/press/press.epx?pressid=9100>
- Extensive Product Functionality. There are a lot of capabilities in BPC that are really impressive. To name just a few: Work Status, Business Process Flows, Word and PowerPoint integration, the guided Action Pane across all user interfaces, Data Auditing, Dimension Member formulas that save having to create and maintain multiple Structures, Dynamic Templates for reporting, Books and Distributor/Collector functionality, Park'N'Go for offline planning, tight Excel integration allowing for advanced reports to be created using just Excel without any other client tools.

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What about the Business Objects planning products?

As I mentioned at the beginning of the article, the recommendation for all new planning implementations is BPC. SAP has published a Statement of Direction, which answers this question best:

"In evaluating Business-Objects Planning XI (formerly an SRC Software product) and Business-Objects Planning Extended (formerly an INEA product), it was determined that SAP Business Planning and Consolidation was a superior solution and provided better functionality overall. Customers using Business Objects planning products can migrate to SAP Business Planning and Consolidation for all of their planning, budgeting, and forecasting needs. SAP is currently developing offerings to aid with database migration and user authorization conversion and the standard planning methodologies to help with the migration to SAP Business Planning and Consolidation."

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Summary

This blog is intended to be the "official SAP answers" on this topic. Anybody who contradicts a statement made above may be misinformed, so please direct them to come here and read this blog!

I KNOW there will be lots more detailed questions on how BPC 7.0 NW works, and rest assured that we will be providing more and more information going into the Ramp Up and beyond. However, I hope I was able to clear up any confusion, and this helps answer some of the big questions you might have had.

Cheers,Ryan Leask currently works as Director, BPC Solution Management.