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How to find the right front-end tool for your TM1 environment

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Factors that impact your search

Choosing the right front-end tool can be a challenge. The huge variety of requirements and tools dramatically complicates the selection process.

There are multiple ways to find a suitable front-end tool. You can visit various platforms to gather information and gain insights. The selection process is as individual and unique as your requirements.

In this white paper you will learn which approach can help you selecting the right front-end tool and which prerequisites need to be considered for a TM1 environment.
You will find answers to the following questions:

- What impacts the search for a suitable front-end tool?
- What selection criteria are essential to a successful front-end tool search?
- What needs to be considered for a TM1 environment?

When looking for a tool compatibility with your requirements and application areas is key.

The market for front-end tools offers a variety of products. Getting a proper overview may be difficult, particularly as each product has its strengths and weaknesses. To complicate matters even more, different front-end tools focus on different application areas like dashboards or analytics.

Comparing the individual strengths and weaknesses will help you getting your priorities right. Don't forget to consider the demands and information needs of users and administrators. Make the customer and his expectations the focus of your attention.

Only who are your customers? Your customers are not only the users that work with the selected tool but also the administrators who handle and maintain it. Keep this in mind as it could lead to a conflict of priorities. If the tasks of administrators and users overlap, you must make sure that the key users are able to administer the front-end tool by themselves.

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Selection criteria for a successful search

A requirement analysis is the first step in the selection process. Here you define the tasks and application areas. They can be devided into planning, analytics, reporting or Business Intelligence as a whole.

The more specific your search is, the earlier it will yield results. Therefore you should know the users' requirements as well as possible. Defining the front-end tool's tasks and application areas should be the first step of your requirements analysis. Is the objective to read out data, to write-back data or to comment on read-out data that other users can view? Or is it a combination of all three? Based on the answers to these questions you can determine whether the requirements fall into the domains planning, analytics, reporting or Business Intelligence (BI) .

Planning does not only include budgeting and forecasting but short, middle and long-term planning, too. Being able to write-back or change data is a key requirement here.

In analytics, the emphasis is on the "free movement" in the data room and on being able to answer upcoming questions by following your own path. You should not restrict the user by tight guidelines.

In reporting, everything revolves around describing, adding and publishing textual information like insights derived from numbers.

The area of Business Intelligence (BI) is extremely complex. Analytics and reporting are aspects of BI. Hence it makes sense to focus on these two disciplines. A dashboard is a combination of analytics and reporting and therefore also part of BI.

With the right front-end tool users can perform more efficiently and effectively.

Another criterion is the clear, visual rendering of information. Are you part of the management team and do you need regular, up-to-date views of KPIs? If so, you need to consider this aspect. Another requirement is the capability to add commentaries and explanations to enable an easy exchange of information within a system. If this scenario applies to you, products with a clear focus on dashboards should be your priority.

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If you are a manager and just consume data, which is prepared and presented to you, the dashboard can provide you with an overview of all the information you need. When you are also on the road a lot, the access from mobile devices is another important criteria - not only for dashboards.

Dashboards are a good starting point for data analysis. Unrestricted movement in the data environment is a prerequisite of any analysis. The users want to search for specific information, edit it and add to it when needed. If this is your requirement, the front-end tool should be easy-to-use and include comprehensive analytic capabilities.

Dashboards are another way to present data and can be used to drill-down into details.

The term self-service BI is defined as end users searching, analyzing and presenting their own analyses without support from IT. It requires tables as well as visual representations. You should keep this in mind as it facilitates data analysis.

TM1-specific requirements

Analytics

General requirements (functional)	TM1-specific support
Free data analysis	Support of SubSets
Users can navigate accessible data on their own	Support of PickLists
Visual and tabular analysis	Access authorization and personalized structures
Connect to multiple data sources	Representation of defined hierarchies
Self-service, no IT support required	Run TI processes
Share insights with other users	REST API support
Any time, anywhere access to data	
High query performance	
Generate additional information during analysis	
Minimal training	
Easy administration	
Secure communication (SSL)	

Reporting	General requirements (functional)	TM1-specific support
	Use Standard reports, also as a basis for running reports (templates)	(see Analytics section)
	Comprehensive formatting	
	Variety of layout and visualization options (tables & charts)	
	Add additional information like text, commentaries, etc.	
	Share insights with other users	
	Any time, anywhere access to company data	
	High query performance	
	Create print-ready reports, PDFs, etc.	
	Minimal training	
	Easy administration	
	Secure communication (SSL)	

Dashboarding		
	Access multiple sources, in this case TM1 Cubes	(see Analytics and Reporting sections)
	Refer POVs (Point of Views) to multiple reports	
	(see Analytics and Reporting sections)	

Planning		
	Capability to write back data and to enhance it with additional information like commentaries	(see Analytics and Reporting sections)
	Perform simulations	Data Spreading
	Versioning of data	Sandboxing
	Work flow support, authorization procedures and access rights	
	Run aggregations, allocations and similar processes	
	Any time, anywhere access	
	High performance	

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Apart from functional requirements, a front-end tool also needs to meet non-functional demands.

Apart from the functional requirements listed above, there are also non-functional demands a front-end tool needs to meet - for instance easy-of-use, intuitivity, an engaging interface and state-of-the-art visualizations. Even though these features are less objective, they should still be part of the selection process.

When choosing a front-end tool, the technical requirements are key. Do you access it via an Excel add-in, the web or a mobile device? Is it possible to deploy the front-end tool in a cloud? How do you implement the tool on your desktop? To answer these questions, you need to involve your company's IT and you need to find out how the tool is installed.

In case of web access, you have to find out whether you need any add-ins, whether Internet Explorer (IE) is set as default browser in your company or whether other browsers are used, too. When mobile access is an issue, you need to find out about operating system support, whether a special app has to be installed and whether access is possible via a web page.

The selection process needs to include your company's IT strategy.

In addition, you need to consider the strategic alignment of your IT. If Microsoft IE (or Edge) is set as default browser and there is no alternative browser available, then this may already be the knockout criterion for some products if they do not support the default browsers. The same applies to mobile platforms. If you need mobile access and if your organization exclusively uses Windows Mobile, then the parameters are set. The same applies to fat clients. Furthermore the global IT strategy regarding on premise or cloud solutions may be an issue.

Conclusion

When choosing a suitable BI tool you need to consider functional as well as non-functional requirements. When an existing OLAP database like TM1 is involved, it is absolutely necessary that all functional requirements of the database are met first. Only then, the price or the front-end tool vendor should influence your decision.

Do you need support in defining the selection criteria and finding the right software tool? Our experts are here to help you.

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