DOES YOUR ORGANISATION NEED A DATA FABRIC?

An interview with Mike Heffner, Vice President of Solutions and Industry Go-to-Market, at Appian Corporation

Financial IT: Mike, thank you for speaking with us today. If you had to summarise the current state of play with the use of data by businesses and other organisations in just two words, what would those two words be?

Mike Heffner: Lost opportunity.

Only 44% of data and analytics leaders think their teams are effective in providing value, according to a new Gartner® survey. And business users are still struggling, too, citing accessibility issues and complexity as barriers to data use. Combine this with low executive confidence in data, and it's clear that data challenges are ubiquitous.

Further, and according to Forrester research, fewer than 10% of organisations are advanced in their use of data.

Let's put it in plain English, but in two sentences rather than two words. Almost everyone has access to huge amounts of data. However, they are typically not doing nearly enough to turn that data into valuable insights.

Financial IT: What do you see as the main reason for this problem?

Mike Heffner: I'd say that most organisations are just not structured to gain insights from the data. Sometimes, there is a lack of clear objectives. In other instances, the data is siloed or of poor quality. Frequently IT teams are resource-strapped so they may be lacking the in-house talent that can gather worthwhile insights. For instance, to cite Gartner again, the lack of available talent is noted as an impediment to the success of data and analytics in an organization.

Businesses leverage more and more technology each year, and each of these technologies provides rich opportunities to collect and take action on new data. Yet with all the options available it's easy for information collection to spiral out of control, with so many disparate systems available to collect copious amounts of data.

Financial IT: What do you see as the main solution?

Mike Heffner: Reducing the answer once again to two words, I'd say: data fabric.

Data fabric is an architecture layer and tool set that connects data across disparate systems and creates a unified view. It is a virtualized data layer. That means you don't need to migrate data from where

it currently lives, say in a database, enterprise resource planning, or customer relationship management application.

The data may be on-premise, in a cloud service, or in multi-cloud environments. Pair this with AI, and a data fabric becomes an even more powerful tool in combining business data in entirely new ways, with particular benefit for digital transformation work. It's a concept that Gartner calls "composable design." That's one reason Gartner named data fabric its top strategic technology trend for 2022.

Implementing this approach as part of your data strategy has an extra advantage: it helps solve the problem of not having enough skilled people. When a data fabric is used as an architectural layer, it can make, create and keep data connections working without needing specialized experts like data scientists or database administrators to maintain the technology at every single stage.

Financial IT: Great. What does a data fabric actually involve in practice?

Mike Heffner: I'd say that you can use a data fabric both as a tool itself or as an architectural layer. Both use cases are correct but it depends on the context.

Regardless of whether you're talking about it as a tool or an architecture, the end result for the organization is the same. Different sources of data that were separated and isolated are now connected. Employees have real-time data to make better, faster decisions. Developers no longer wait weeks or months for migrations before creating new applications.

Take, for example, a multinational financial institution. This institution would likely have challenges with data quality, security, and access. And they would handle a lot of sensitive information—like customer and financial data—that would need to comply with regulations across different countries and regions. A data fabric provides a foundation for addressing these issues by keeping the data where it is. No migration to get everything into one spot. Instead, a data fabric sits on top of these systems and stitches them together thus avoiding any sensitivities related to governance or regulatory compliance.

Financial IT: So, a data fabric is an innovative way to look at data strategy?

Mike Heffner: Right. A data fabric can help with data governance initiatives. Data governance, which is a framework that defines processes, policies, and for handling data, isn't enough to help you realize the full potential of your enterprise data. Even the best framework will only provide part of the puzzle. That's because getting value from data comes down to a combination of a good data governance framework, people's ability to use and rely on data, and the right tools to get the job done. Having a solid, rigorous data strategy that takes into account all those factors is becoming a requirement for organizations, not just a "nice-to-have," as regulators demand better risk management reporting. A data fabric provides an easy and accessible way to unify and connect data across your organization.

In a real-life example, the upcoming SEC ruling, which goes into effect mid-December, requires companies to notify the SEC and public within four days of cybersecurity incidents that will have a material impact on business operations. With these sorts of regulations it's not just about detecting and blindly reporting when the event happens, it's about how one detects, evaluates and ensures reporting is timely, accurate and comprehensive.

So, in the case of the new SEC ruling, if a cybersecurity breach takes place, a data fabric can take the incident and then ingest it into a common process across the enterprise and help effectively manage it. For this sequence of events to occur, the process needs to be smooth and transparent. This enables the back-, middle-, and front-office to understand their roles and collaborate effectively in managing the data and coming up with an appropriate response.

Financial IT: Great, so how does a data fabric help an organisation?
Mike Heffner: I'd highlight a few key things.

First off, a data fabric provides a unified view of all the data. That makes it much easier to apply governance policies in a consistent fashion across all data sources.

Further, you can apply the governance policies in real time. That reduces the risk of decisions being influenced by outdated information. In the Gartner survey I mentioned earlier, it noted the most successful chief data and analytics officers outperform their peers by building an agile and strategic data and analytics function that shapes data-driven business performance and operational excellence.

Because you can see the history of any piece of data, it is easier to ensure compliance with regulations governing handling of data.

A data fabric is flexible, scalable and secure. Say no more.

Finally, a data fabric reduces the workload on the organisation's IT department, boosting overall efficiency.

Financial IT: Thank you.