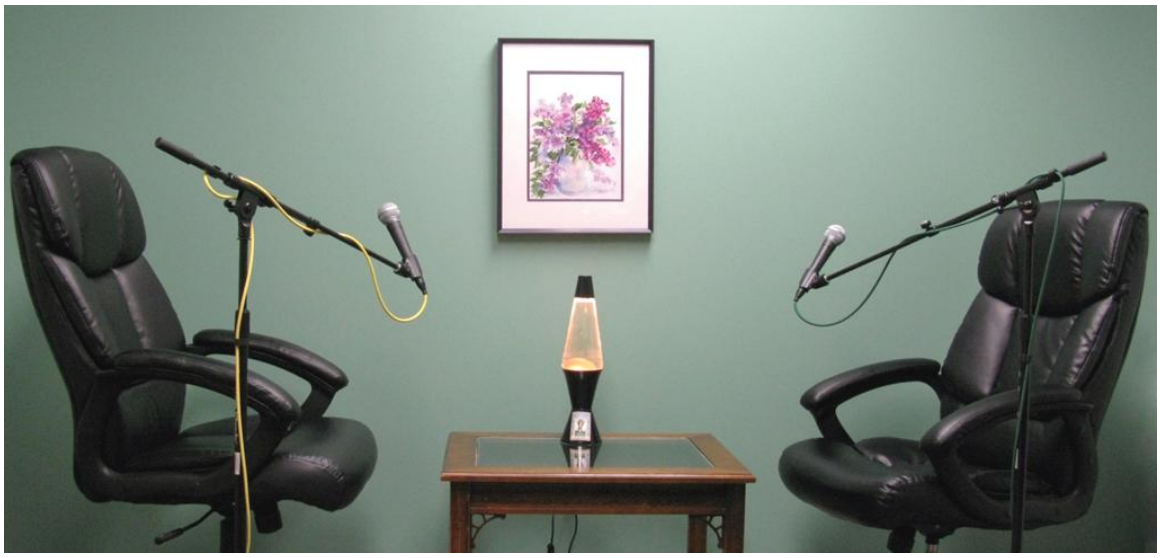
BBBT Podcast Transcript



About the BBBT

The Boulder Business Intelligence Brain Trust, or BBBT, was founded in 2006 by Claudia Imhoff. Its mission is to leverage business intelligence for industry vendors, for its members, who are independent analysts and experts, and for its subscribers, who are practitioners. To accomplish this mission, the BBBT provides a variety of services, centered around vendor presentations.

For more, see: www.bbbt.us.

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Claudia Imhoff: Welcome to this special edition of the Boulder BI Brain Trust podcast. I'm Claudia Imhoff and I'm here in Grants Pass, Oregon, at the Humphrey Strategic Communications annual Pacific Northwest BI Summit. I'm pleased to have the opportunity to interview each of the vendors attending this event.

CI: With me is Donald Farmer. Donald is the Vice President of Product Management for QlikTech. Welcome, Donald.

Donald Farmer: Thank you, Claudia. It's great to see you again.

CI: Wonderful to have you speak with me today. We had a very interesting session this morning on Big Data, the BI consumer, we learned an awful lot—or we heard an awful lot—about the disruptive technologies and all that kind of stuff. What was your opinion of this morning?

DF: It was very enjoyable, for one thing. One thing I really love about this event is the way in which you have so many people in the room, with so many different opinions, even though we come from, in some ways, very similar backgrounds.

CI: A somewhat homogeneous industry, and yet we're all over the place.

DF: Exactly. One of the really interesting things about it was the few that were talking about Big Data. Now, of course, Big Data is the theme that everybody sort of picks up on these days. It becomes part of almost every conversation that you have about data analysis, we end up talking about Big Data. But, one of the most interesting things for me was this idea that it's becoming mainstream. It's becoming a mainstream idea, regardless of whether the data is actually big or not, or whether it's just complex. It's coming into the mainstream.

It was very obvious from the conversation that we're aware that Big Data has been around for a long time, even though we didn't call it that. The problem's been around for a long time, but often in very specialized parts of the organization. There were decision scientists, there were operational research people who were doing this. But, It wasn't necessarily business-intelligence people. It wasn't necessarily the mainstream IT department.

That reminded me of one of the views that we have at QlikView about how we can build this ourselves. Our view of Big Data, we often compare it to the telecom industry, where people talked about it's solving the last-mile problem, that you can build the infrastructure, but actually getting a telephone into everybody's house and onto every desk was the big challenge.

For us, with Big Data, it's very similar. You can build the infrastructure, but how do you get it onto the desktop for the business user? How do you take Big Data the last mile, from the IT department onto the desktop?

CI: I want to pursue that with you a little bit more, about how QlikTech does that. That is the nut of the problem, isn't it? We can build the most beautiful architecture in the world, but if people can't get at it, can't use it, then it is worthless.

DF: Exactly. If the right people can't get at it, I think that's important. We talk a lot about Big Data. We talk about the data scientist and the role of the data scientist. Don't get me wrong, I'm fascinated by the role of the data scientist. I know a lot of people who do that, and they've got some really exciting things to do. But business users should, also, be able to benefit from Big Data. One of the reasons is because they can often explore the data in their own terms with their own understanding. A data scientist may understand the business and the algorithms, but there's nothing like enabling a business user to explore and make their own discoveries.

CI: Someone who's in the very dregs of a business problem...The data scientist may be somewhat removed from that problem. The customer service rep is sitting right in the middle of it. [laughter]

DF: Exactly so. The other difference, I think, is that the data scientist may be looking at the Big Data in all its complexity, primarily, as a single data source. They're mining for that information. The business users, typically, much more interested in how does this relate to my other data sources that I've got? How do I relate it to my CRM system? How do I relate it to my...

CI: That's a good point.

DF: ...order system. They want to get all these things integrated in some way. You don't, really, expect the data scientist to do that. That's something that the business user, hopefully, can do themselves. With our technology, our goal is to enable the business user to integrate Big Data into their everyday business discovery applications that they build.

CI: Again, part of it is the data scientist may not have to do anything with his results. He may just be there to create the results. It's that business person who says, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I have a customer that's angry with me. Let me look at the analytic information about this customer. Let me, also, look at their recent activity and what they're doing. What's my next best action with this particular customer?"

DF: Exactly. That's very much a business user focus problem. In fact, if you look at the data scientists, one of the things that they have to do, one of the skills they need is not only analytic skills, but they, actually, need to be storytellers. They need to be able to communicate to business users.

CI: Now, we talked about storytelling. I want you to explain what storytelling is. It's, actually, I think, becoming more and more critical in the BI message?

DF: I think storytelling is critical because simply giving results and insights isn't enough unless you can contextualize it. The context is the story. The story that's around us. I can give you a very simple example just from the very recent meeting I had with a customer where we were talking about their quarterly production numbers. The quarterly production numbers were down. That showed up very clearly on the dashboard. That wasn't the story.

The story was the quarterly production numbers were very nearly right. But one production run was going to finish 10 days after the end of the quarter. Therefore, actually, the numbers weren't as bad as they looked.

You don't get that context from the dashboard. It's a story that you tell. The data scientist, in many ways, has to be able to take the insights that they can get into the data and set it in a context. For me, data story telling is all about contextualizing the numbers and insights that we have.

CI: How does QlikTech do that?

DF: There's a couple of ways in which we can do it. One of my favorite ways is simply by enabling a real-time collaboration between users. Users can interact on a document at exactly the same time, or they can annotate the document in a very rich way. Not only that, they can walk through the annotations and see the context in which other people made annotations, and then, in the product we're currently developing, what we call "QlikView.next," data storytelling is an absolutely key theme of that, and will introduce specific technologies for storytelling.

CI: Oh, fascinating.

DF: We recently made an acquisition of a Swedish company called NComVA, which not the catchiest name, but they have great technology for data visualization, with data storytelling and animated storytelling as an essential part of that product suite as well.

CI: Such an interesting technique, especially for the perhaps not so technologically savvy business user. For example, if we see a trend line going down is that good or is that bad? Or is it irrelevant because it'll go back up because the production of whatever it is, is going to catch up. Be overdone next month, or something.

DF: That's why it's a story. Of course, one of the dangers of managing to metrics is that people will very often...

CI: They focus on just the metric.

DF: Yeah. The data scientists here can help, of course, by adding that context, but data scientists are often incredibly complex in what they're doing. It's often very difficult to explain. Their concept of all sorts of things can be... They're using specialized language. It's like talking about something as simple as a time dimension to a business user, to a data scientist. They'd probably say, "What kind of time are you talking about? Are you talking about real time? Absolute time? Sidereal time"? Who knows what they're talking about.

CI: [laughs] When the poor business user just wants to know what's happening right now.

DF: Yeah, exactly.

CI: It was an interesting discussion, and certainly one that I think was very valuable to all of us in the room. It was eye-opening in some respects to hear the different perspectives on Big Data. The people who disagree with some of the marketing hype, those that think it's very disruptive, those that think it's wonderful and it's going to move the needle forward. I was actually quite encouraged by our discussion of moving it away from Big Data to analytics. Big Data analysis. In other words, it's not the data that's so critical. It's, "What do I get from it"?

DF: Or what are you doing with it. Yeah, exactly. In some ways, the data is the least interesting part about this. It's how you use it. That was nice. From that point of view, it was a very refreshing discussion rather than a desiccating discussion like so many of these are. I thought this idea of, in a sense, the data's there. Data's always been there in various forms, but the really critical thing for me about Big Data is not the data itself so much as the fact that your use of it is transient.

You use schema on query. You and I have been working on data warehousing for a long time. The whole concept was that you created a special data store with a special schema in order to warehouse your data. That's exactly what the idea was.

CI: To answer a certain set of known questions, really.

DF: Exactly. Here's a place I'm going to put the data. I'm going to store it in a specific structure, structured in order to answer these business problems. With Big Data, what you're doing is applying the schema on query, and when you apply a schema on query, that could change tomorrow. It can change every time you issue the query, actually, which is one of the cool things about it if you use the Hadoop and MapReduce. It's a completely different approach, which is very focused on what you do, rather than the structure of the data.

CI: I like that, and I think that came across quite loudly that it is. We've got to stop thinking that it's just a technological play.

DF: Exactly so. Exactly. It's so easy to focus on the technology because the technology frankly is kinda cool and interesting. But at the same time, we've got to focus on the business uses, and on the role of the user in defining those uses, because those uses of Big Data shouldn't be driven only by the data scientist. I think there's a danger there that it becomes a research project, rather than being driven by the business requirements.

CI: Then it becomes something that is not so relevant to the business.

DF: Less interesting to them.

CI: Yes, absolutely. Well, unfortunately we're out of time, but I do want to thank you so much, Donald. Again, I'm with Donald Farmer, the vice president of product management of QlikTech. Thanks, Donald.

DF: Thank you very much.

CI: Thank you for listening to this special edition of the BBBT podcast, and thanks to Scott Humphrey for giving me this opportunity and for hosting the Pacific Northwest BI Summit.