Alation takes flight with $9m series A, launches Data Accessibility Platform

MATT ASLETT

6 APRIL, 2015

The company's platform brings Google-like crawling capabilities to information management in order to reduce time to analysis. This follows on the heels of its recent $9m series A funding round.

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Founded by data management, machine-learning and natural-language experts with track records at Oracle, Microsoft and Apple, Alation is looking to take advantage of Google-like crawling capabilities for accessing data in enterprise data platforms, with a view to reducing the time to analysis. The company's Data Accessibility Platform is now available, following on the heels of a recent $9m series A funding round.

THE 451 TAKE

Alation has emerged with some pretty lofty claims, but has an impressive set of early customers as well. Potential customers are bound to be skeptical, especially given the potential depth and breadth of the commitment involved in accessing enterprise-wide data sources, and further details on early-adopter deployments will likely be required to win over the doubters. That said, while there's been a lot of focus on underlying data platforms and user-facing analytics in recent years, there has been less innovation in the middle tier – which is essential in driving value, so Alation is entering a market that is primed for potential disruption. The company is also on a collision course with some the biggest players in the data management market, which won't sit back and let it eat their lunch. But if Alation can successfully prove it has a differentiated approach, a lucrative exit is a possibility.

CONTEXT

Alation has announced the launch of its Data Accessibility Platform and a $9m series A funding round as it emerges from stealth with a new approach to information management. The Redwood City, California-based company was cofounded in 2012 by experts in data management, machine learning and natural language with track records at Oracle, Microsoft and Apple.

CEO Satyen Sangani previously ran Oracle's financial-services warehousing and performance management business. CTO Venky Ganti previously worked on advanced data cleansing and data quality at Microsoft, and is an alumni of University of Wisconsin-Madison, as is lead engineer Feng Niu. The fourth of the cofounders, head of product Aaron Kalb, was previously involved in engineering, research and design in the Advanced Development Group at Apple, working on iOS and Siri.

The word 'alation' describes the state of being winged, and Alation the company can claim to be off to a flyer. It already has customers paying between four- and seven-figure sums (it won't be more specific than that) to access data using the Data Accessibility Platform. Name customers include eBay, Square, Inflection, MarketShare and iHeart Media. It recently raised a $9m series A funding round, led by Costanoa Venture Capital and Data Collective with Andreessen Horowitz, Bloomberg Beta, and General Catalyst Partners. Alation is also backed by individual investors including Host Analytics CEO Dave Kellogg, Endeca founder Steve Papa and AngelList CEO Naval Ravikant. The company currently has 30 employees, including contractors.

PRODUCTS

Alation's Data Accessibility Platform is designed to improve access to enterprise data by crawling existing data sources (principally relational databases but also file systems including Apache Hadoop) as wells as documents and identity management systems, and by providing a centralized data catalog that can be used by analysts, data consumers, data stewards and IT users alike. The Data Accessibility Platform serves a number of use cases including collaborative analytics, data-warehouse optimization, data governance and data search and discovery. It is said to be used by customers as a knowledge management platform, capturing not just data about data (metadata) but also contextual information about how it is used, and how data sets and users relate to each other.

The Data Accessibility Platform supports natural-language search and self-service analytics, with underlying machine-learning capabilities designed to drive faster queries and collaborative analysis. The platform also incorporates a SQL query tool with autocomplete functionality based on an automatically updated catalog of queries and results. For data-warehouse optimization, the platform provides granular information on data usage and resource utilization; while for governance, the platform creates a dynamic data dictionary and automates data lineage. It can also be used to push data-governance policies to data users.

TECHNOLOGY

The Data Accessibility Platform is built on more than 70 open source projects including Linux, PostgeSQL and Python, but features proprietary differentiation in three core areas: the crawling layer, the social layer and depth of extraction. The company has developed its own 'Google like' crawler functionality to access the underlying data sources (the company's depth-of-extraction claims are driven by support for more than 30 different databases) and extracts information related to schemas, structure and semantics, metadata, data profiles, query and usage logs, data dictionaries and identity (including OAuth, single-sign-on systems and LDAP/Active Directory).

Once that information is ingested into the Data Accessibility Platform, the company's own functionality for extraction, indexing, parsing, language modeling, quality scoring and expertise mapping gets to work on it. The resulting data catalog represents the core technology, and is designed to capture not just the data and the related metadata, but every interaction with the data. The Data Accessibility Platform also offers a social layer designed to enable and encourage users to access data and share it with others.

COMPETITION

The primary competition for Alation is likely to come from existing information management products from the likes of IBM, Oracle, Informatica and SAS Institute. While those and others offer metadata management, Alation maintains it is differentiated by capturing and providing contextual information about how the data is actually used within an organization. The company likens previous metadata management approaches to an encyclopedia; while Alation describes its approach as being more like Wikipedia, with its evolving set of links providing greater context in addition to the core definition.

The company maintains that the Data Accessibility Platform is complementary to self-service analysis and data-preparation products, but we believe there may be some overlap with the new breed of data-preparation tools from the likes of Paxata and Trifacta, as well as ClearStory's underlying data-governance functionality. It is true that those companies are focused specifically on Hadoop. Alation sees it as just one of many data sources, however, so there is some potential for cooperation. Waterline Data Sciences would appear to be more directly competitive with its discovery and profiling capabilities. Although again, it is more focused on Hadoop. Similarly, Cloudera's Navigator and Teradata's Loom provide data-lineage and governance capabilities, but are again focused on Hadoop.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS
The startup is bringing new tools and techniques to an age-old problem, one that has never been solved by the various incumbent approaches to information and metadata management.

WEAKNESSES
As with any startup, potential customers are bound to be skeptical, although the company can already boast an impressive set of early adopters. More details on their deployments will be required to win over the doubters.

OPPORTUNITIES
The 'big data' trend has refocused attention on the need to integrate data from multiple sources and understand its lineage, so Alation is entering a market that is already primed for potential disruption.

THREATS
The company will go head-to-head with some the biggest players in the data management market, which will be keen to clip its wings. If it is successful, that could lead to a potentially lucrative exit, however.