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THE RISE OF UNIFIED DATA AND ANALYTIC PLATFORMS
THE CASE FOR CONVERGENCE

In this report from the Eckerson Group, dive into unified data analytics platforms (UDAP). UDAPs are the culmination of a multi-decade trend toward functional convergence.

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The Rise of Unified Data and Analytic Platforms

The Case for Convergence

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September 2020

Research Sponsored by Incorta

About the Author

Wayne W. Eckerson has been a thought leader in the data and analytics field since the early 1990s. He is a sought-after consultant, noted speaker, and expert educator who thinks critically, writes clearly, and presents persuasively about complex topics. Eckerson has conducted many groundbreaking research studies, chaired numerous conferences, written two widely read books on performance dashboards and analytics, and consulted on BI, analytics, and data management topics for numerous organizations. Eckerson is the founder and principal consultant of Eckerson Group.

About Eckerson Group

Eckerson Group helps organizations get more value from data and analytics. Our experts each have more than 25 years of experience in the field. Data and analytics is all we do, and we're good at it! Our goal is to provide organizations with a cocoon of support during every step of their data journey. We do this through online content (thought leadership), expert onsite assistance (full-service consulting), and 30+ courses on data and analytics topics (educational workshops).

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Executive Summary

Unified data and analytic platforms (UDAP) are the culmination of a multi-decade trend toward functional convergence. UDAP products provide a comprehensive and wholly integrated data and analytics experience that accelerates insights, user adoption, and return on investment. For companies afflicted with proliferating data silos and analytical tools, UDAP products are welcome relief.

In 2019, many large software vendors shipped UDAP products or acquired technology to flesh out their data analytics portfolios. They are racing to catch a number of UDAP startups who built a single platform for data and analytics from the ground up. Many customers — both large and small — have jumped on the UDAP bandwagon to accelerate their time to insight, consolidate data and tool silos, and gain a rapid return on their data investments.

As all-in-one solutions, UDAP products may not always offer best-of-breed functionality; they usually focus on core functionality that customers use 80% of the time, foregoing specialized features. But they make up for any deficiencies by cutting time to insight, simplifying data access, and centralizing governance and administration, all of which significantly reduce costs and improve employee and customer satisfaction.

Data analytics experts (like myself) often have difficulty believing the claims of some UDAP providers. We expect that it can take many months and millions of dollars to build a comprehensive data and analytics environment, not the few weeks or months that some UDAP providers claim. However, once you listen to UDAP customers extol the virtues of their platforms — which are designed to reduce deployment times and total cost of ownership — you start to recognize that significant change is afoot.

Recommendations:

1. Take a briefing with a few UDAP vendors to understand their value proposition.

2. Attend a UDAP vendor's user conference or seek customer references to hear their experiences first hand.

3. Identify a use case where your company might benefit in full or in part from a UDAP. This might be a greenfield environment, a department that needs a quick ROI but has limited IT resources, or a business unit afflicted with data silos or competing analytical tools.

4. Prototype a UDAP to determine its ease of use, speed of deployment, scalability, and cost profile.

Fragmentation and Convergence

Fragmentation

Humpty Dumpty Syndrome. The core applications, processes, and analytics within most companies are fragmented. Thanks to decentralized business models, mergers, acquisitions, technical solutions, and other factors, organizations have allowed their core operational systems to splinter into silos. Just as all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again, organizations have a difficult time integrating the applications and data that constitute their enterprise.

Consequently, data analysts can spend weeks finding, cleaning, and rationalizing data that comes out of enterprise resource planning (ERP), customer relationship management (CRM), and dozens of other systems to create simple reports. Data analysts have little time to analyze and explore data, and business leaders don't get the information they need to make decisions in a timely manner. The data they do receive is chock-full of errors and inconsistencies; consequently, users stop trusting and using the data.

Fragmentation has been a hallmark of the analytics space since its inception. According to an Eckerson Group poll, 43% of companies have 2 to 3 business intelligence (BI) tools, while 22% have 4 to 6 tools, and 19% have more than 7 tools. Most companies also have multiple data ingestion and data integration tools and multiple, disparate data warehouses. The fragmented data and analytics environment adds complexity, overhead, and cost to the delivery of information and insights. Many companies are getting tired of playing systems integrator for core internal systems — they just want a single holistic environment that ties everything together.

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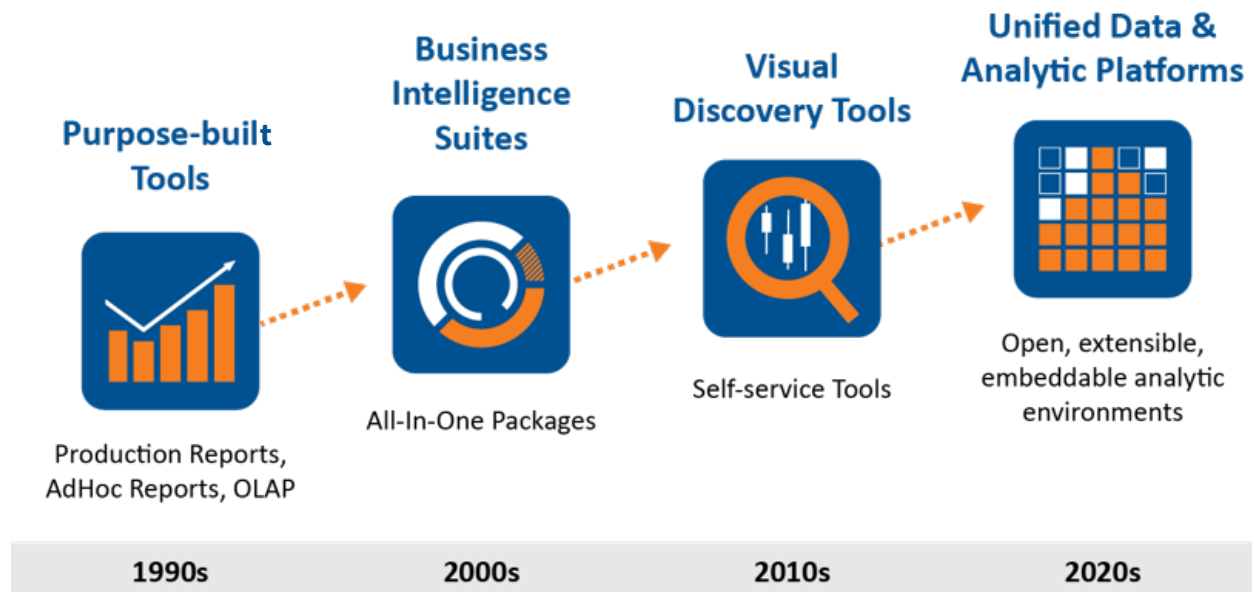
Convergence

Recognizing the Humpty Dumpty problem, software vendors have long tried to deliver integrated "solutions" that take the pain out of pulling together applications, processes, and data to support business operations such as managing a supply chain, a sales pipeline, or a data environment. Selling solutions is also more profitable than selling a point product and increases the vendor's stickiness with a customer.

In the data and analytics space, there has been an inexorable march towards functional convergence since the advent of desktop and client/server tools in the early 1990s. Back then, most analytics tools served a single function: pixel-perfect reporting, ad hoc reporting, or OLAP

queries. Ditto on the data side, with different tools for ETL (extract, transform, and load), data quality, data warehouses, and data lakes, among others. Customers had to purchase multiple purpose-built tools from different vendors to support user requirements. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1. Evolution of Business Intelligence

BI products have evolved from purpose-built tools to integrated platforms. Data tool functions have converged in a similar way.

From Suites to Platforms. Soon enough, vendors began acquiring or building tools to deliver BI or data "suites" composed of lightly integrated modules of functionality (formerly stand-alone tools). By the 2000s, vendors began re-architecting these suites into data or analytics platforms running on a common set of services, assimilating new functionality as it appeared, such as visual analysis, storytelling, collaboration, data preparation, data catalogs, machine learning, web clients, and cloud-based servers.

Data and Analytics Converge. For a brief moment in the 2010s, the data analytics market found stasis. Analytics vendors delivered full-featured and integrated analytic platforms, while data vendors shipped highly integrated data platforms. But in the past five or so years, data and analytic vendors have blown past their traditional boundaries and expanded in one another's space. Analytic vendors now incorporate data management modules, including data modeling, data preparation, data warehouses, and data catalogs, while data vendors now offer visual analysis, dashboarding, and in-database analytical functions to complement their data platforms.

> *These new products — many of which are cloud-native — provide a one-stop shop for organizations looking to consolidate and simplify their data analytics footprint.*

The result is a unified data and analytics platform, or UDAP for short. These new products — many of which are cloud-native — provide a one-stop shop for organizations looking to consolidate and simplify their data analytics footprint. UDAP enables companies to replace multiple data, reporting and analytics tools with a single platform from one vendor that meets the information requirements of all business users and developers. UDAP also makes it easy for smaller companies or departments without IT resources to offer the same (or better) data and analytic functionality as bigger firms. (See figure 2.)

Figure 2. The Convergence of Data and Analytics Platforms
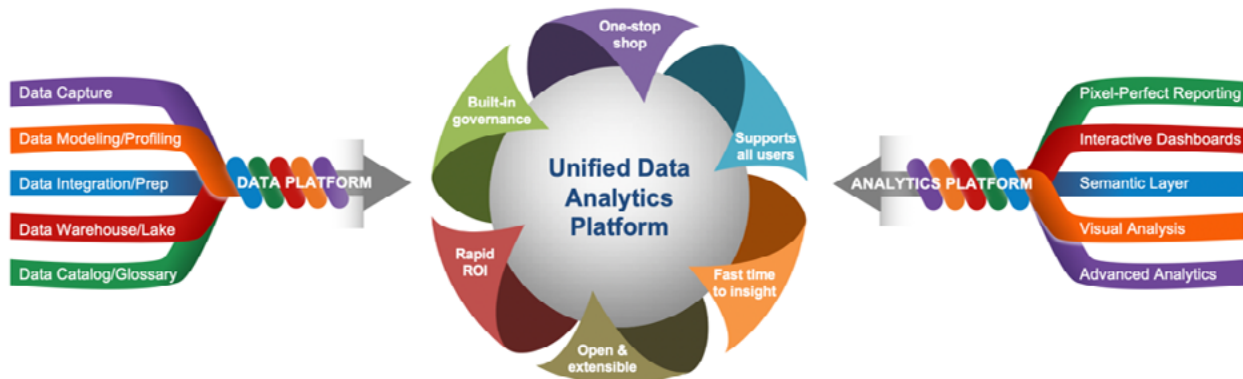
UDAP Vendors. Truth be told, many incumbent vendors have long offered both data and analytics capabilities. SAP sells SAP Business Warehouse (BW) for data warehousing and SAP BusinessObjects for BI and analytics; for many years, Information Builders offered data integration through its iWay division and BI through its WebFocus division; ditto for SAS, IBM, Microsoft, and Oracle, each of which offer both data management and analytic products. Although these vendors all had the makings of a UDAP, they never packaged or marketed the capabilities as a single unified platform.

Incumbents. This is changing. For example, SAP Data Warehouse Cloud is a new offering built natively in the cloud that is packaged and tightly integrated with SAP Analytics Cloud, its cloud-based analytics platform. Running on HANA Cloud Services, the platform provides a single environment to support all data, analytics, and planning needs for an enterprise of any size. Similarly, Microsoft recently announced Azure Synapse, which is a next-generation Azure SQL Data Warehouse that is tightly integrated with Power BI and Azure Machine Learning. Likewise, Databricks now offers its "Unified Data Analytics Platform" that provides a cloud environment for large-scale data engineering and data science.

Acquisitions. Other large software vendors joined the fray in 2019 but with a slightly different approach — they acquired functionality from third-party vendors rather than build it organically. For example, Cloudera recently acquired Arcadia Data to flesh out its Cloudera Data Platform with AI-powered big data analytics. Likewise, Salesforce acquired Tableau Software and Google acquired Looker to complement their data platforms with business

intelligence and analytics software. These and other vendors, such as Tibco, now have to weave these disparate products into a seamless platform and customer experience.

Challengers. Newer or smaller companies recognized the trend toward functional convergence early on. They designed UDAP products from the ground up to create a holistic environment rather than assemble them from disparate products and technologies. These include Infor Birst, Incorta, Domo, TMMData, Knowi, Hypersonix, SiSense, and Qlik. This list will grow as more vendors recognize the market opportunity for functional convergence.

Dimensions of UDAP

Benefits

Selling UDAP isn't hard. There are many benefits for companies whose existing environment is riddled with data silos, redundant tools, inconsistent data, and security vulnerabilities or who lack IT resources to build a data and analytic environment. UDAP also provides a smooth on-ramp for companies looking to add data science and machine learning capabilities without creating another technology silo. Here are the primary benefits:

- **One-Stop Shop.** With UDAP, companies only deal with one product and one vendor, simplifying their data analytics landscape. This eliminates redundancy and gives business users one place to go to get information and insights. It also means there is only one product to master, accelerating self-service and data literacy. Although many companies use UDAP products to complement existing tools and platforms, the real value of UDAP comes when it serves the entire enterprise.

- **Supports All Users.** A UDAP product by definition supports all business users, including casual users (executives, managers, front-line workers, customers, and suppliers), power users (data analysts and data scientists), and developers. Granular permissions determine which functionality and data that individuals can access within a UDAP environment.

- **Built-In Governance.** As an end-to-end, integrated environment with a single administrative interface and semantic layer, a UDAP product makes it easy to configure and manage user permissions and govern user access to both data and reports. It also simplifies managing reports and dashboards, monitoring usage, and certifying changes. This accelerates onboarding and training new users, and reduces costs.

- **Faster Insights.** Many customers report that time to insight is the biggest benefit of their UDAP environment. Because a UDAP is an integrated environment and

often runs in the cloud, it is easy to install, configure, and start using compared to a heterogeneous environment with multiple tools and dependencies. A unified environment also reduces the time and cost to train and support business users.

- **Rapid ROI.** By eliminating overlapping and redundant tools and simplifying usage and administration, a UDAP delivers almost immediate ROI. Most UDAP customers report that they run their environments with fewer administrators than before, even as they expand the scale and scope of their UDAP deployment. By improving time to insight, UDAP delivers more value faster to business users.

- **Open and Extensible.** Since it's hard for one vendor to anticipate all business requirements, the best UDAP products are open and extensible. Through APIs, software development kits, and a library of extensions from UDAP customers and partners, customers can add needed functionality even if it isn't in the core package. Some UDAP providers offer marketplaces where customers can browse and select third-party extensions and plug-ins.

- **Complementary.** UDAP products that are committed to openness are easy to insert into existing processes and integrate with existing tools. For instance, some UDAP products enable customers to swap out its visualization module with a third-party BI tool via an open interface.

Potential Challenges

Anyone who has worked in technology for a decade or more knows there is no silver bullet. Every technology, vendor, and technique has advantages and disadvantages. The same is true for UDAP. Fortunately, UDAP products have addressed these challenges, convincing even the biggest and most risk-averse companies to come on board.

- **Vendor Lock-In.** The biggest risk with UDAP is vendor lock-in. Customers that run their entire data and analytics environment using one product from a single vendor need to have great confidence in the vendor and its viability. They need to be assured that the vendor has significant market traction and development resources to continue innovating and extending the product to meet current and future needs. Most UDAP customers say time-to-market and cost advantages help overcome such hesitations.

- **Feature Lock-In.** Similarly, a UDAP locks customers into the features and functionality offered by the UDAP vendor. Rather than take a best-of-breed approach, UDAP vendors try to be all things to all people, which means they may not offer best-in-class functionality in all areas. Most UDAP products address this by offering an open and extensible platform that adapts as customers mature and seek new and more advanced functionality.

- **Stand-Alone Silo.** Like any new technology, UDAP can easily turn into another data silo deployed by a renegade department. This is usually not a problem for small and midsize organizations where the "silo" encompasses the entire enterprise. But in larger organizations, UDAP products need to either complement other tools and environments or replace them. To work cooperatively in heterogeneous environments, most UDAP products are open — they let other BI tools query their semantic layers or extract and move UDAP data to other data environments.

- **Scalability.** As a one-stop shop, a UDAP product has to pick its battles, and unlimited scalability is not always top of the list. However, with the cloud and grid technologies, most UDAP products now can handle almost any data volume and workload. One large bank found that its data load times dropped from four hours to 15 minutes when it introduced a UDAP product; another maintains a data warehouse with multiple tables of 3+ billion rows supporting real-time queries; and a third large company claims the UDAP has become its data lake.

Use Cases

Customers generally gush about the business value a UDAP provides and downplay any downsides. Most bring in the UDAP to solve a single problem in one department and then spread it to other departments and divisions once it proves its value. Some use it for batch reporting and dashboards, while others use UDAP to support continuous intelligence, real-time updates, operational analytics, or data pipelines to support machine learning solutions.

Quick-Service Restaurant. For one of the largest quick-service restaurants in the world, UDAP offers a "single platform where data engineers, data scientists, your business analysts, everyone can work in the same platform through a browser. They don't have to install anything or go elsewhere for data. They are all working in the same tool and getting things done," says a director of analytics who declined to be named.

Another benefit was time to insight. "Within six weeks with a two-person technology team, we built our data model along with 10 reports. We got everything up and running super-fast," says the director. The UDAP also enables users to drill down from summary metrics to SKU data across billions of transactions. "We deliver better forecasts and that has helped us achieve a 40% reduction in food waste in about six months."

Broadcom. "We wanted a simple, scalable platform to support our BI and analytics needs and quickly integrate data from newly acquired companies," says Andy Nallappan, vice president and chief information officer at Broadcom, a large U.S.-based telecommunications provider. Broadcom selected Incorta, a UDAP with a high-performance data environment that eliminates the need for ETL when used with many packaged applications. Incorta also offers a capable visualization front-end but works with most BI tools.

"We started using Incorta in one department, then expanded it to finance and supply chain, and now use it to track our call to cash process. We have done all this work quickly with a very small team," says Nallappan. Broadcom uses Incorta to integrate data from dozens of sources. For complex ETL jobs, Broadcom models the data in Incorta and uses PySpark to handle transformations. Despite the growing workload, Nallappan says he has not had to add new people since the platform is "simple and flexible and has scaled to meet our needs."

Pilot Flying J. "We have reduced our technical debt by replacing a proliferation of legacy and siloed reporting tools with a single modern BI and analytics platform. All of our employees, including executives, look at the same numbers and make better decisions as a result," says David Clothier, vice president of finance and strategic development at Pilot Flying J, the largest operator of roadside travel centers in North America.

Pilot Flying J uses Birst, a cloud-based UDAP that delivers rich dashboards and OLAP capabilities from a cloud data warehouse with an open semantic layer. Birst was acquired by Infor in 2017 and now integrates with Infor applications. Pilot Flying J uses Birst to deliver pixel-perfect reports and dashboards to 30,000 users, many of them using mobile devices. The company has reduced the time to generate end-of-month financial reports from 12 hours to 5 minutes, saving $500,000 in labor costs, and it has pared the number of reports from over 500 to 30.

Manufacturing. Traeger Grills uses a UDAP from Domo to unify data from dozens of data sources, including its ERP, Salesforce, Google Analytics, and its e-commerce system, without extensive support from IT. "Previously, it was hard to get a comprehensive view of different business processes," says Dave Gerbert, director of business analysis. Putting data at the fingertips of its business people has transformed Traeger Grills.

"I was hooked the first time I opened the Domo app on my phone," says Jeremy Andrus, CEO. "Real-time anywhere in the world, in my back pocket, I had access. I wake up in the morning, look at my app, and know a hundred things that have happened to the business while I've been sleeping. Real-time access to data enables our staff to see a problem, see an opportunity, and it empowers them to act for themselves."

Domo is a cloud-native, multi-tenant UDAP with more than 1,800 customers that provides an end-to-end data analytics experience. It offers more than 1,000 connectors to data sources and applications, a complete data transformation environment, a fast, analytic database, AI-enabled interactive dashboards, and a GUI-based development environment for creating custom applications.

VELUX. The leading worldwide maker of residential skylights, Danish-based VELUX is transitioning from a traditional, on-premises data environment using SAP Business Warehouse, BusinessObjects, and Analytics for Office to a modern hybrid cloud/on-premises architecture. The new environment initially will be used to expand self-service opportunities for data analysts in various business units. Eventually, it could replace the on-premises platform as well. Data analysts already use SAP Analytics Cloud to add visualizations

traditional reports and dashboards. SAP Data Warehouse Cloud will make it easy for data analysts to create their own virtual work environments (i.e., "Spaces") without duplicating data. When asked if a single, integrated platform for data and analytics using a combination of SAP Data Warehouse Cloud and SAP Analytics Cloud is a big driver of the modernization strategy, Andreas Madsen, senior data and analytics partner, replied "Absolutely!"

Fortune 50 Telco. One of the largest telecommunications companies in the United States uses a UDAP product from TMMData to get a 360° view of customer support journeys — from viewing online support pages to dialing the call center. As a result, the company significantly reduced calls to its service center, saving more than $2.3 million in two years. TMMData provides a SaaS-based, multi-tenant UDAP product geared largely to marketing departments and agencies.

UDAP Characteristics

We've described the major features of a UDAP and outlined its primary benefits and potential limitations. But what exactly is a UDAP? What are its technical components? How is it architected?

No two UDAP products are exactly alike. Some are cloud-based, others hybrid. Some excel on the back-end, while others differentiate with broad and deep analytic capabilities. Some offer planning and simulation modules, while others provide robust machine learning functionality. From a technical perspective, a UDAP delivers full-stack functionality and a fully integrated data and analytics architecture. (See figure 3.)

Figure 3. UDAP Architecture
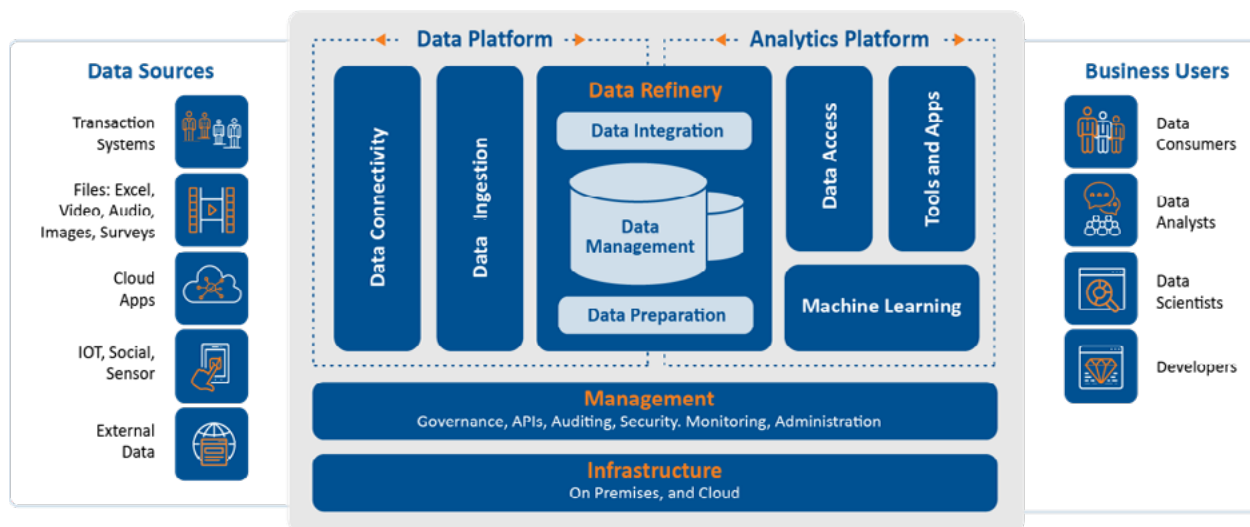
Following are detailed descriptions of the architectural features and components of a UDAP.

- **Data Connectivity.** A UDAP connects to a variety of data sources: internal and external, structured and multi-structured, cloud and on-premises, files and applications. Ideally, UDAP products come with smart data connectors to dozens, if not hundreds, of source systems and applications that make it easy to query and extract data from those systems without programming or customization.

- **Data Ingestion.** Once connected, a UDAP supports a variety of ingest methods, including batch snapshots, incremental updates (via change data capture), streaming events, and direct (or pushdown) queries. This gives organizations the flexibility to match ingest methods to business requirements for data freshness as well as better manage nightly batch windows as data volumes grow.

- **Data Refinery.** Once data is ingested, a UDAP provides a rich environment for transforming data into a variety of data products designed for consumption by analytic users and applications. This refinement is a joint effort between the information technology (IT) or corporate data department, which uses data integration tools, and data engineers, analysts, and scientists in the business units who use data preparation tools. (See the following bullets.)

- **Data Integration.** Data integration represents the way the IT team manipulates and transforms source data before making it available to the business community. Typically, data integration involves tagging, encrypting, formatting, standardizing, and cleansing data. It also involves combining and aggregating data, often using complex logic, to simplify data access for business users as well as speed up query performance.

- **Data Management.** UDAP tools store data in one or more tightly integrated data management systems. Most ingest raw data into a staging area or data lake where it is cleaned, tagged, formatted, encrypted, and standardized. Most also combine, aggregate, and model the data, either virtually or physically, into a dimensional schema housed in a data warehouse, data mart, or OLAP cube. This data is also often formatted into columns and placed in memory to support fast query response times.

- **Data Preparation.** Data engineers and data-savvy business users (e.g., data analysts and data scientists) use data preparation tools to create custom data sets to support local use cases. Data preparation tools enable business users to clean, format, standardize, and combine data as well as apply logic to aggregate, calculate, and filter it. Data scientists and data engineers use sophisticated data preparation tools to build complex data pipelines to support machine learning applications.

- **Data Access.** Most UDAP products support multiple data access methods beyond connecting to a database via ODBC or JDBC interfaces. Self-service users generally use a semantic layer built into a BI tool or OLAP cube to query a dimensional data set. Data analysts search a data catalog to find relevant data sets and then use SQL to query a database schema or tables in one or more sources. Developers leverage the platform's APIs when building analytics into a custom application.

- **Analytic Tools and Apps.** The majority of business users access, view, and analyze data using reports and dashboards. They might also use custom applications with embedded analytics as well as planning tools to prepare budgets. Power users employ more specialized tools (e.g., data preparation, data catalogs, and data visualization) to find and connect to data sources, clean and combine data sets, train and run analytic models, and analyze and publish results. Developers use DevOps and DataOps tools to increase productivity and cycle times, while reducing data defects.

- **Machine Learning.** A growing number of UDAP products support the full machine learning lifecycle, from data exploration and preparation, to model building, model deployment, and model management. UDAP products make it easy for organizations to experiment with data science and build internal expertise without making an additional investment in tools and people. Some UDAP products specialize in helping teams of data engineers and data scientists build and manage complex data pipelines to support machine learning solutions.

- **Administration.** Administration is a broad area that encompasses governance (i.e., certifying data, metrics, and reports), security (i.e., permissions, privacy policies, single sign-on, and data archival), administration (i.e., tool configuration, updates, and management), disaster recovery (i.e., backup, restore, and recovery) and monitoring (i.e., tool usage, report usage, query usage). Managing an entire data and analytics environment from a single application is a major advantage of using a UDAP product.

- **Infrastructure.** In the not too-distant past, data and analytics products ran on servers and databases within a corporate data center. Today, computer processing is moving to the cloud, along with, data and analytics processing, which increasingly happens on massively parallel computing server clusters. This demands that data analytics providers offer both cloud and on-premises solutions and a way for customers in transition to span both environments.

The preceding features make a reasonable checklist when evaluating UDAP products, or any BI environment for that matter. Besides these technical requirements, it's also important to understand a vendor's heritage, since its architecture rarely deviates from its historical technical choices. It's also important to understand a product's maturity: newer products tend to lack functionality that customers might want, while older ones might box customers into outdated capabilities.

Conclusion: A Revolution in the Making

UDAP products are revolutionary. By offering an out-of-the-box, wholly integrated data and analytics environment that is easy to deploy and use, UDAP products break from tradition. Most experts expect that it can take many months and millions of dollars to build a comprehensive data environment, not the few weeks or months that some UDAP vendors claim. It's only once you listen to UDAP customers extol the virtues of their platforms — which are designed to reduce deployment times and reduce total cost of ownership — that you recognize that significant change is afoot.

However, it's important to recognize that UDAP products are not a silver bullet. Most are young and need to mature. Many UDAP products are sold by start-up or young firms whose future is not assured, although many large software vendors are now crowding the market. As all-in-one products, they might not always offer best-of-breed functionality, but they make up for any deficiencies by accelerating insight, simplifying data access, and centralizing governance and administration, which reduces overall costs and significantly improves the user experience.

UDAP products are here to stay. They are the culmination of an inexorable trend toward convergence between data and analytics functionality and the need for a single platform to govern delivery and consumption. Every data analytics professional should evaluate these products to determine what role they might play in their organization.

About Eckerson Group

Wayne Eckerson, a globally known author, speaker, and advisor, formed Eckerson Group to help organizations get more value from data and analytics. His goal is to provide organizations with a cocoon of support during every step of their data journeys.

Today, Eckerson Group helps organizations in three ways:

- **Our thought leaders** publish practical, compelling content that keeps you abreast of the latest trends, techniques, and tools in the data analytics field.

- **Our consultants** listen carefully, think deeply, and craft tailored solutions that translate your business requirements into compelling strategies and solutions.

- **Our educators** share best practices in more than 30 onsite workshops that align your team around industry frameworks.

Unlike other firms, Eckerson Group focuses solely on data analytics. Our experts each have more than 25 years of experience in the field. They specialize in every facet of data analytics — from data architecture and data governance to business intelligence and artificial intelligence. Their primary mission is to help you get more value from data and analytics by sharing their hard-won lessons with you.

Our clients say we are hard-working, insightful, and humble. We take the compliment! It all stems from our love of data and desire to help you get more value from analytics — we see ourselves as a family of continuous learners, interpreting the world of data and analytics for you and others.

Get more value from your data. Put an expert on your side. Learn what Eckerson Group can do for you!

About Incorta

Incorta is the only Unified Data Analytics Platform powered by Direct Data Mapping. Purpose-built to help companies stay ahead of the accelerating rate, volume, and complexity of modern enterprise data, the platform delivers unmatched speed and visibility. Incorta is built with open standards and integrates with cloud-friendly tools and platforms, making it easy to consolidate data in the cloud and extract meaningful insights. By making any data source continuously available for analytics, the platform helps data engineers, data scientists, business analysts, and machine learning algorithms make more accurate, timely, and transparent decisions with faster access to richer data sets. Backed by GV (formerly Google Ventures), Kleiner Perkins, M12 (formerly Microsoft Ventures), Telstra Ventures, and Sorenson Capital, Incorta is powers analytics for some of the most valuable brands in the world. To learn more and try it for yourself, visit www.incorta.com.