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.

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Guest(s):	**Glen Rabie**, CEO
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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: My guest today is Glen Rabie. He's the CEO of Yellowfin. Welcome, Glen.

Glen Rabie: Thank you very much, Claudia.

CI: You and I did a talk this morning on Big Data and how it's impacting the BI consumer. In the talk itself, we heard people say, "Look, we've been doing these kinds of things for years." People have been struggling, at least, trying to use data to do all kinds of sophisticated analytics. The use cases really haven't changed, but the technology has changed. There's been a tremendous shift there. What do you have to say about that?

GR: Look, I agree. It was a fascinating talk because, again, it got me thinking about the industry and where we've been and what we're doing. When I started, back in the day, doing business intelligence analytics, the kind of problems that the organization I was working for was trying to solve and their approach to solving them really wasn't much different to what people are talking about today.

The difference being, though, is that I was working for a multi-billion-dollar organization that could afford to do projects like this. That had the capacity to hire the skill sets. We had a team, I think probably about 150 people, working in BI and analytics.

CI: Wow.

GR: This was not a small organization -- obviously, a multi-million-dollar initiative within the organization. It was highly successful. We did things then that I think, really, have stood the test of time in terms of the kind of outcomes that were achieved. Now, I think the big difference at the moment is that this rapid change in technology, the rapid reduction in cost of hardware and software has put these kinds of projects in reach of so many organizations—tantalizingly close. It looks like you can do it, and everyone

understand the value proposition. I think it's that. It's almost in grasp. It's almost in reach.

The question I have around that is, is it? Is it as close as we think it is, or is it something that..? We're missing that piece about the people. The technology's there, but the one thing coming back to this organization that it could afford was all these people. It hired the best. It had that capacity to do so.

I wonder if that's possible. With all the technology today, do we still get that people piece right? Do we still find the people that can actually do this kind of analysis and execute on it within organizations?

CI: I think it's important to think about that, because the luxury that you had in the big organization is they could throw bodies at the problem, right? Today, companies can't throw the bodies at the problem. They throw technology at it, and, well, first of all, it's pretty disruptive. The second thing, though, is that the technology doesn't come easily. [laughs] You've got to have somebody that understands the technology. That was another topic that we touched on this morning, and that was that it is still very confusing to IT, to the people trying to implement these environments. We've turned it into this technological discussion as opposed to the business discussion. Yes, I can do this, but so what? What is it going to do for the business? Have we lost sight of the business problem that we're trying to solve in this rush, in this enthusiasm for the technology that's now available?

GR: I think partially that that's true. You look at, really, the hype, and we talked about this to some extent. I think we all agree, generally, that we're, right now, almost at the peak of the hype cycle. At some point, there's going to be a lot of bitter disappointment. There are organizations right now that are embarking on these sorts of projects for the wrong reasons. They're doing it because someone else is doing it or that classic quote that Joel made about...

CI: Somebody read a magazine about it.

GR: From the in-flight magazine. You take that and you go, there are people doing this for the wrong reasons. They're doing it for the fad, and wanting to be perceived as leaders in their space. That's going to lead to disappointment, and it's going to, ultimately, at some point, reset expectations about what's possible and what's needed. It comes back to -- you wonder about learning from history. In the early days of BI, there was a lot of research and a lot of discussion around, "What does it take to be successful, what are the kinds of skills sets you need, where do they need to be, how is it structured, and why are we doing it?" It was all about the business value and the business case for it. We seem to have bypassed that. We're repeating the sins of the past.

CI: We're in that stage, the painful early stage of data warehousing, of, "If you build it, the business community will come." I get that sense today that that's where we are with big data. If I build a Hadoop thing, [laughs] the business community will come, regardless of whether they know what to do with that Hadoop thing. [laughs]

GR: That's exactly right. To me, our conversation was around, what's the value of data? It's interesting. Part of it is saying, well, the business owns the data. I mean, that's one of the common pieces. I think, in the whole debate about big data and BI and analytics, my view is it's actually IT that owns the data. I mean this from the perspective of they're the ones who are tasked with ensuring the data is in a state that's usable for the business, however the business wants to use it.

I think that that's the piece that maybe hasn't really caught on. IT's trying to solve business problems when they shouldn't be. They should be solving data problems. They should be dealing with that layer and making it consumable for all segments of the business, whether it would be the data scientist or just the average person at the shop front.

CI: I like that, because basically what you're saying is that IT is sort of the technical steward, as opposed to the business community being the more business steward of the data.

GR: Well, the business is responsible for capturing information through transactional applications and business processes.

CI: Right, and defining it and building the rules and defining the rules.

GR: All that stuff. They're responsible to take it, to analyze it, and to do something about it. That piece in between, the infrastructure, and making sure that that's seamless and frictionless and that the organization just gets on with its job, that's IT's job. That's kind of what I've started to think about this morning, so it's actually been a good morning. In terms of you saying, well, really, isn't that the job of IT? Isn't the job of IT to make data frictionless—that it comes in, it goes out, and people do what they need with it?

CI: It's sort of like the utility companies. They make electricity available. I don't know how the grid works. I don't know where it comes from. I don't care. I just want the light to turn on when I flip the switch.

GR: That's exactly right. I'm the consumer. We need it. I want my lights to go on at night. Whatever it takes, [laughs] however it gets there, you do your job. None of us go to the electricity provider and go, "You know what? I expect you to deliver it in this way, shape, or form." It's done for you. It's optimized. I think if we thought of data in the same way, then all of this discussion around what model, et cetera, and where it should be, just ends up being a purely technical discussion around enablement and saying, "Where does it fit?" Then the usage of data is, again, separated out.

You can have two quite distinct conversations, because you now are dealing with two different audiences who have very, very different needs, and you don't have IT trying to select front-end tools, because that's really not their job. Well, do they?

CI: It shouldn't be. They're not the ones using them.

GR: They feel that that's part of their infrastructure piece, which I don't think it is. It comes back to, "I've bought my electricity, but I'm going to choose the lampshade...I'm going to choose..."

CI: Or it's like the utilities saying, "I'm going to choose the lampshade for you."

GR: That's right. No one's going to put up with that. It's been a good morning, crystallizing some of those thoughts and go, "Where should the decision lie?" Maybe that's where the business is. You look at the transformation that's occurred in BI and analytics over the last few years, all the self-service products. Because, yes, they were smaller, more adaptive, because the business found a way to choose the tools that they wanted to use and go around IT.

That's not sustainable forever. There needs to be a partnership at a level. I think that existed because IT wanted to own the whole stack, and they just can't.

CI: Frustration on both sides. They couldn't own it, and the business couldn't get at it. It was just frustration all the way around that caused people to do things that were not in the best interests of the overall enterprise. It's been an interesting discussion. I think we're about out of time, but thank you so much, Glen.

GR: It's a pleasure.

CI: Yeah. My guest is Glen Rabie. He's the CEO of Yellowfin. It was wonderful talking to you.

GR: Thank you, Claudia.

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.