Avalon Consulting, LLC positioned as the big-data professional for partners and customers

KATY RING

13 JAN 2017

With both Cloudera and SAP singing its praises, Avalon Consulting LLC seems to have gotten the balance of its technology advisory capabilities just about right.

451 Research

Avalon Consulting LLC was founded in 2003 to provide systems integration consulting to large enterprises with a focus on portal-based web applications and content management systems. Avalon initially focused on high-end platforms offered by Vignette (CMS, web portal) and Autonomy (enterprise search).

By 2009, it had dozens of Fortune 500 clients, and began investing in a NoSQL delivery capability based on the needs of its client base. In 2010, it began offering services around Hadoop, and refocused its enterprise search capabilities around both Elasticsearch and Solr. The company has now taken all these technologies and added new consulting services to its capabilities. This report focuses on the development of its NoSQL, Hadoop and SAP HANA Vora services.

THE 451 TAKE

Over the past couple of years, Avalon has worked hard to establish itself as one of the rising stars of the big-data consultancy market. Its focus on mentoring, and its investment in its big-data Center of Excellence in Austin, Texas, are paying off in terms of customer wins and in establishing new strong, strategic partnerships with both Cloudera and SAP. To manage the next phase of its growth, it needs to put more structured sales and marketing processes in place and create software assets, building on its strength in packaged scenarios for extracting data from data lakes.

CONTEXT

Headquartered in Plano, Texas, Avalon has 75 employees, and goes to market organized by geography, with five offices across the US in Plano, Austin, Washington DC, Chicago/Minneapolis/St Louis (Midwest) and Boulder, Colorado. The company is internally funded, and its expertise is structured around four practices: analytics, search, digital asset management, and big data and NoSQL.

One of the main operational initiatives the company has undertaken over the past 18 months is to pivot more toward direct client engagement, rather than only sub-contracting through vendors such as Hortonworks and MarkLogic. To date, it has won a dozen or so direct clients, and now has Master Service Agreements in place with 10 of the top 75 Fortune 500 companies.

TECHNOLOGY SERVICES

NOSQL SERVICES

As the market transitions from RDBMS to use of NoSQL, there is an increased requirement to tie these systems together in order to aggregate data. The challenge tends to be that organizations struggle to scale beyond three to four data sources. Customers understand that they need to correlate data for analytics, but don't necessarily want to create an entire data lake. So Avalon's structured approach is to build a data hub.

To do this, Avalon works with customers to understand what they are trying to derive as the end result, and then creates a centerpiece to achieve this that ties RDBMS and NoSQL sources together. Taking this approach, the company has worked with Fortune 50 companies in media and logistics, bringing together 60-70 sources across many operating companies that do not speak the exact same language. In media, Avalon has worked with legal and content professionals that do not use the same professional terms, and has created a common set of semantics to ensure that legal work is not being duplicated.

Avalon uses off-the-shelf products – such as MarkLogic (from which it has received Partner of the Year, Innovator of the Year and Partner Excellence awards), Couchbase, Cassandra and Redis – and applies them in a customized way as a data hub bringing together relational, flat and NoSQL solutions so that rational business decisions can be made using analytical offerings across organizations.

One thing the consultancy has found is that many organizations do not have the modeling skills required behind the semantic network to deliver results. Organizations cannot just tie data together, they need to create a knowledge database to model the data, and they also need to understand how the semantics connect it all. The data must be indexed and stored in an aggregated manner, and this is where Avalon's data hub approach proves beneficial.

HADOOP CONSULTING GROUP

Avalon's Hadoop Consulting Group is technology-focused, but is always helping customers think about how they can create competitive advantage using data. As VP Hadoop Practice Leader Tony Jewitt puts it, "Companies can create new applications based on new data sources and [they] want to know what technologies are helpful – after all, Hadoop is a collection of about 30 separate Apache open source projects to store and process data. We are demystifying the Hadoop ecosystem for our customers."

Avalon has been working with big data for five years, and partners with third-party Hadoop distributors. A primary use case of interest to customers is SQL on Hadoop, performing lots of structured data analytics with Hadoop. To do this, Avalon works with a RDBMS under the hood (such as Postgres) so that a search engine can be run on the Hadoop cluster. This requires the consultancy to work with the client to address data governance and security requirements, selecting the right approach and technologies depending upon the type of data, such as big batch, interactive or streamed data.

Originally focused on Hortonworks, the Hadoop Consulting Group has also developed a partnership with Cloudera over the past year or so. 451 Research spoke with Cloudera's regional sales leader of South Central US, Dean Patton, who manages the relationship with Avalon. "Having a community of specialized SI partners such as Avalon is critically important for Cloudera to provide regional customers with the broadest range of capabilities and rates than what many of the global SIs can offer."

After the first project that Cloudera and Avalon worked on together, Avalon rose to become one of Cloudera's most trusted partners in the region. According to Patton, the consultancy has a very strong management team that invests a large amount of time to attract and maintain talent, especially in its Center of Excellence office in Austin.

Cloudera is very selective about the partners it works with, and Patton says that it is unfortunately common in the Hadoop space for systems integrators to occasionally overinflate their capabilities around this complex architecture. Cloudera says it has always found Avalon to have strong architectural skills and deliver excellent services. As a result, Patton trusts Avalon as a business partner to the extent of making fiscal-year plans and discussing pipelines to help it make better staffing decisions.

SAP HANA VORA

Avalon has recently become a service partner for SAP, adding SAP Vora (SAP's SQL-on-Hadoop offering) to its portfolio of big-data service offerings.

While HANA is at the epicenter of SAP's data management strategy, Vora marks SAP's commitment to providing enterprise-grade processing to data lakes. SAP has dominated the enterprise market for over four decades, and will leverage that know-how to solve companies' big-data challenges. SAP Vora can be positioned stand-alone within accounts (i.e., with no SAP footprint) or in conjunction with HANA, where the enterprise and data lake worlds can be combined.

SAP Vora was purposely designed to deliver enterprise-grade features to data lakes/big-data environments. It delivers special-purpose engines (graph, time-series, etc.) in one offering, and provides one logical view across different types of data. SAP Vora runs on Hadoop, and extends Apache Spark. It integrates to HANA, allowing bidirectional consumption of data without the need to move data between tiers.

Linda O'Connor, the Global GTM Lead for Big Data Technologies at SAP, explained to us the need to deliver accelerated and repeatable implementation services to remove the complexity from big-data initiatives. In meeting Avalon's Jerry Platz at a SAP Hosted partner workshop, O'Connor learned of the company's breadth of expertise in the big-data consulting space. She was particularly interested in the Quick Starter packages (Customer 360˚, IoT etc.) that Avalon offered, and subsequently introduced Avalon to SAP's Global Head of Big Data Consulting, Rolf Zeidler, in addition to the North American sales team.

Avalon Consulting LLC is now part of SAP's PartnerEdge program. Avalon is working with several groups at SAP – GTM, sales, partner ecosystem and product marketing. It is collaborating with SAP to deliver test drives to allow customers to have a functional experience of SAP's software in addition to software testing prior to it being released to the market.

CUSTOMERS

Shaw Industries Group is a subsidiary of Berkshire Hathaway headquartered in Dalton, Georgia. It's the world's largest carpet manufacturer, with more than $4bn in annual revenue, and is a customer of Avalon's. 451 Research spoke with Shaw's Jon Rollins, who works in the IT Planning Department and is responsible for information management.

Shaw had heard the hype around Hadoop, so Rollins looked into the technology from an infrastructure perspective, and to find use cases for deployment. Initially, he ran a small pilot using Hadoop with security log data internally within the IT department, and not getting the business involved. The pilot got good results, so the team started reaching out for partners.

Shaw is a Teradata shop, and is interested in replicating its data warehouse into the Hadoop ecosystem for augmentation. This is because the IT department gets many requests from different parts of the business, and the traditional data-warehouse process is cumbersome. Rollins wanted help to speed up getting data into Hadoop to give Shaw more agility, and to drive some adoption via traditional SQL access.

Shaw does not have Hadoop expertise in-house, so Rollins was looking for trusted partners. Using 451 Research publications, he discovered Avalon, and had a good meeting with the consultancy. He was particularly impressed with Avalon's partnering capabilities around knowledge transfer. Shaw and Avalon began by enabling Kerberos on Shaw's Hadoop cluster.

In 2017, Rollins expects to identify the killer business case for the technology, working with Shaw's CIO and Avalon, and thinks using Hadoop in the digital-marketing area could be a big win for the company. He was not concerned about Avalon's small size when contracting with the company because the scope of work Shaw was looking at was contained. Furthermore, Rollins says that his company's leadership is pushing everyone to become more agile, and he feels you get more agility with a smaller partner.

COMPETITION

When it comes to consulting services for Hadoop, smaller regional consultancies are often good value. Besides Avalon in the US, niche experts also include Altoros Systems, Caserta Concepts, Cloudwick, Search Technologies and Trace3. Many global consultancies and systems integrators also have Hadoop capabilities. These include Accenture, Capgemini, Cognizant, CSC, Deloitte, EY, Fujitsu, HCL, Infosys and TCS.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

Avalon has a great reputation for architectural competency and knowledge transfer. The consultancy appears not to have much difficulty in attracting and retaining high-caliber talent. Because Avalon is not a software reseller, it is viewed as an honest advisor, with partners and customers alike attesting to the company's professionalism.

WEAKNESSES

Avalon is beginning to reach the size where it needs to create more formal structures around sales and marketing. It is concentrating on developing a stronger direct sales capability, but it also needs to strengthen its marketing activities to capitalize on the business development work it has been undertaking.

OPPORTUNITIES

Avalon has a lot of opportunities for growth around big data. It could develop reusable templates for search, placing the patterns in a knowledge hub to de-risk projects for clients, as well as helping Avalon scale. SAP HANA Vora has the potential to create a lot of work for the consultancy because, in order to work, the offering needs unstructured data to become structured. The company could also develop its packaged search scenario capabilities within a broader BI partner ecosystem.

THREATS

With market maturity, the attractiveness of larger-scale service providers will become stronger in delivering global data-driven production environments for the Fortune 500, which may constrain Avalon's growth, although there will always be opportunities for smaller specialized consultancies to provide services.