

REPORT REPRINT

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Action hopes to show it has the 'X factor' with new hybrid data focus

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The vendor has resurrected its Vector analytic database as both a stand-alone product and an enabler of Actian X, its new hybrid database for transactional and analytic workloads.

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Database and data management vendor Actian has announced a major rebranding exercise as well as the launch of its Actian X product, which includes its resurrected Vector analytics database engine, alongside its existing Ingres transactional database engine. The combined operational and analytic database will be Actian's flagship as it targets growing opportunities driven by hybrid data management requirements.

THE 451 TAKE

The launch of the Actian X hybrid transactional/analytic database seems at first glance to be a radical departure for Actian, given the relative conservatism of its installed base. However, Actian's focus on hybrid data, along with the launch of Actian X, plays to the company's strengths in combining the transactional capabilities of Ingres with a renewed commitment to the Vector analytics engine. Actian's community of users now has the option of extending their investments in the Ingres transactional database to run analytics workloads on the combination of operational and historical data. The company has been through so many changes in recent years that we are reluctant to predict how long this one will last. A new executive management team is also in place, however, and we imagine it will be invested in ensuring that the company begins to realize some growth from its combined assets.

CONTEXT

In October 2016, Actian confirmed to us that it was abandoning its previous Actian Analytics Platform strategy, discontinuing its associated products and refocusing its attention on data management and integration. Since then, the company has been through some significant changes, including the appointment of a new executive team. It has now announced another new strategic initiative, driven by the launch of a new hybrid database for both transactional and analytic workloads, enabled by the resurrection of one of those discontinued products: the Vector analytics database.

Before we go on to describe Actian's new database and hybrid data strategy, let's pause to recap how the company got to this point. Actian was originally founded in 1980 as Relational Technology to commercialize the Ingres relational database, which began as a research project at the University of California Berkeley in the early 1970s. The company was renamed Ingres in 1989 before being acquired by ASK Computer Systems in 1990. ASK was then acquired in 1994 by CA Technologies, which in 2005 open-sourced the Ingres database and spun off Ingres Corp as a private company, backed by Garnett & Helfrich Capital.

In 2009, Ingres teamed up with VectorWise, a database engine spinoff from Amsterdam's Centrum Wiskunde & Informatica scientific research establishment, to create an in-memory vectorized database engine that Ingres subsequently acquired in February 2011. Later that year, the company changed its name to Actian before embarking on an acquisition spree that saw it acquire non-relational database specialist Versant, data integration and data management vendor Pervasive and massively parallel analytic database provider ParAccel.

Those acquisitions, combined with the development of a SQL-on-Hadoop engine based on the in-memory vectorized database, were supposed to position Actian for success driven by the emerging demand for big-data analytics products. It never really turned out that way, however, prompting the company to announce that it was discontinuing Actian Vector and Actian Vector in Hadoop, along with Actian Matrix (based on ParAccel's technology), as well as Actian DataFlow and Actian DataFlow for Hadoop (courtesy of Pervasive) and focusing instead on its its DataConnect, DataCloud and Business Xchange integration offerings, along with the Ingres, Versant and PSQL databases.

That was prior to a significant leadership change, announced in November 2016, that saw former BeyondCore, HP Inc, Siebel, Oracle and Intel executive Rohit De Souza appointed president and CEO, and board member and former Blue Coat Systems, HP Inc, Mercury Interactive and IBM executive David Murphy elected executive chairman. Terry Garnett and David Helfrich remain on Actian's board and the company continues to be backed by Garnett & Helfrich Capital and TPG Debt Fund (TPG Capital).

PRODUCTS

Action remains best known for its Ingres relational database product, which provides it with an installed base of several thousand customers. The launch of Action X likely signals the beginning of the end of the Ingres brand.

Action X is the future of the Ingres database and much more besides. Positioned as a hybrid transactional and analytic database engine, Action X combines the existing Ingres row-based database engine with the Vector X100 columnar analytics engine, and also includes Action DataConnect for Action X for data integration, as well as the Action Enterprise Monitoring Appliance and Action DataCloud Backup.

Current Ingres customers will automatically be provided with the Vector analytics engine if and when they adopt Action X, but will be able to take advantage of the functionality if and when they choose to do so to support traditional operational and analytic applications separately, while also developing new applications to take advantage of the hybrid data-processing functionality.

As well as incorporating the Vector X100 engine in Action X, the company also continues to offer the Action Vector as a stand-alone analytics database, as well as the Action Vector Analytics for Hadoop SQL-on-Hadoop implementation. The former Versant object database also continues to be available but will be positioned as Action NoSQL and is in line to be upgraded with graph capabilities later this year, while the former Pervasive PSQL embedded database will be known as Action IoT Embedded Engine and positioned (as the name suggests) for Internet of Things edge processing devices.

In addition to the Action Database product family, the company continues to offer the Action DataConnect data integration product, as well as the Action DataCloud integration platform as a service (iPaaS). The company also updated Action DataConnect to version 11, positioned for hybrid data management with support for on-premises, cloud and hybrid integration, as well as a combination of data, application and B2B integration. DataConnect v11 is also targeted specifically at both data integration specialists (which have been the traditional users and were the focus of previous versions up to v9) and self-service integration users (which were the focus for v10) and as such provides an upgrade path for both v9 and v10.

COMPETITION

Action faces a variety of competitors given the breadth of its portfolio, but the primary competition for its Ingres database has come from the primary relational database providers: Oracle, IBM, Microsoft and SAP. The launch of Action X doesn't change that dynamic much, although it does give Ingres customers a more interesting upgrade path, and the combination of Ingres and Vector gives Action a differentiated offering to compete with its traditional rivals as well as the emerging set of vendors offering a combination of operational and analytic processing – such as MemSQL and VoltDB.

Action Vector as a stand-alone database could also be considered competitive to Oracle, IBM, Microsoft and SAP for analytics workloads, as well as Hewlett Packard Enterprise's Vertica and Pivotal's Greenplum, while Action Vector Analytics for Hadoop competes with the likes of Cloudera's Impala, Pivotal's HDB, HPE's Vertica on Hadoop, Apache Drill, Apache Spark SQL and the Presto project.

Meanwhile, positioning the former Versant object database as Action NoSQL will bring it into greater competition with Objectivity Inc's ThingSpan, as well as InterSystems and NoSQL databases from the likes of MongoDB, IBM, Microsoft, OrientDB, MarkLogic and ArangoDB. Meanwhile, Action IoT Embedded Engine will compete with the likes of Edge Intelligence, Cisco's ParStream database, MapR Edge, and Greenwave Systems' AXON Predict, and SAP HANA Edge Edition.

The Action DataConnect offering competes with on-premises integration products from the likes of MuleSoft, Talend, Informatica, IBM and TIBCO, while DataCloud competes in the iPaaS market with the likes of Dell Boomi, Informatica Cloud, SnapLogic and MuleSoft.

SWOT ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS

Thanks to Ingres and its data integration products, Actian has a mature and largely loyal installed base of customers. It also has a fresh executive team that will be invested in ensuring that the company begins to realize some growth from its combined assets.

WEAKNESSES

Despite multiple attempts, the company has lacked a coherent strategy that tied the various pieces of its multiple acquisitions together and has failed to deliver significant growth from its installed base.

OPPORTUNITIES

The launch of Actian X gives the company a differentiated offering to compete with its traditional rivals, while also serving its installed base.

THREATS

Action faces a number of external competitors but perhaps the biggest threat is its inability to capitalize on its opportunities. The new executive team will be looking to avoid that.