Business Intelligence Publisher & Windward Reports … What's the Difference?

Ever wonder what the real differences are between products developed by billion dollar corporations versus products developed by million dollar companies? Or maybe you're wondering why you would want to switch from Business Intelligence Publisher to Windward Reports, when BIP is made by Oracle, a leader in the industry. Let this quick, straightforward comparison of Windward Reports and BIP resolve your uncertainty. Here, we will compare the two development tools and determine which features of each product are most beneficial to the user. In the end, we hope to demonstrate that Windward Reports really is the best solution for saving time and money when designing and generating reports.

Installation
The comparative process begins with installing the software onto your system. Installation for the BI Publisher demo is only somewhat smooth, as the set up process is not intuitive. After the basic installation, the user has several optional post-installation tasks, some more complicated than others. Trying to figure out how to set up these items took our developer two full days to figure out before finally giving up! To top that, the installation manual is very difficult to follow and does a poor job of addressing problems the user may encounter during set up. Installation for Windward Reports, however, is a simple, clear-cut process. Even new users are able to install and set up WR in just a few hours, and the documentation walks the user through each step to prohibit encountering any problems. Windward also provides a pdf guide for quick reference and a step-by-step video to ensure ease-of-installation.

Getting Started
To learn the development environment, each system comes equipped with a user guide and samples. BIP's user guide is very extensive, and a lot of information is unnecessarily repeated. The language used is also heavily geared towards developers, which is good for developers, bad for regular business users. Many explanations are either incorrect or incomplete, making it very difficult to learn and understand many of the features. As far as samples and examples go, it is obvious that many of BIP's have not been tested – many do not work without finding & fixing their errors. Windward's user guide, however, is straightforward and uncomplicated. That makes our features easy to understand and implement, allowing the user to avoid confusion while advancing his knowledge and skills.

Interface
BIP splits its reporting application into two areas. One section is run through the user's web browser and is used to manage all of the report files and data and to implement the **Scheduler**. The second part can be used through any word processing application that can create rtf files. Windward's application, on the other hand, relies on one, simple interface – AutoTag in Microsoft Word. This single application interface for report creation is much more favorable to technical and non-technical users.

Report Creation
With BIP's immense syntax, confusing manual and tricky jargon, learning how to build templates requires a significant commitment since there is a lot to learn and remember. In addition, although BIP does use Word in its Template Builder, it is optional, so not all users will have the familiar functionality and consistency of development in Word. Windward Reports, however, has a low learning curve, as it uses Word throughout the report design process. Since AutoTag implements as a Word add-in, WR makes it extremely simple for any user to quickly learn and be comfortable with template creation.

Many users think the high learning curve for Business Intelligence Publisher is worth it simply because they believe that Oracle inherently has more to offer than other companies' products. While BIP does provide features that Windward Reports does not, Windward's comparative features tend to be simpler and more straightforward, allowing more business users the capability and confidence to create reports on their own. The best example of this lies in the difference between building templates and using tags in each application, which we will compare in this section along with several other features.

> **Template Creation**
> BIP's **Template Builder** for Word attempts to increase productivity by automating some tasks for the user. For example, it can be used to 'drag-&-drop' fields from data into the template, create charts, and automatically build tables. **Template Builder** also helps the user build charts and automatically generate simple tables. However, it doesn't help build tags that aren't part of a simple table or chart, which means that until the user remembers each and every single tag, he'll be running back and forth between the template and the manual.
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> Although the **Template Builder** is optional, it provides a few useful features that make it worth it for BIP users to employ. One is its previewer option; without Template Builder, the BIP user must upload the report template after every change in order to test it. Windward's preview feature is more efficient in this case, as the user simply clicks the **Report** menu for a preview. In addition, there is no way to validate your mark-up without installing the **Template Builder.** Validation errors are cryptic, limiting the validation power. Again, Windward is more efficient, as it includes a **Validate** tool that checks the syntax of tags before running the report, allowing the user to find and fix errors before they occur.
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> With Windward, the user is not required to learn or use so many different tags. In fact, AutoTag only has 14 different tags, making it much simpler for the business user to create simple templates. In fact, WR enables many full-scale reports without having to know all of the tags. Once a user finds out about a tag, its use is intuitive, so there's no need to refer to the manual each time a new tag needs to be implemented. Unlike BIP, Windward doesn't make you do extra work to install a tool that should be there to begin with.

Coding
Even with the Template Builder, BIP users will have to create tags almost explicitly through hand-coding. Windward requires its users to do very little hand-coding, and provides powerful wizards for building tags.

Tags
BIP has access to all XSL elements and some XSL-FO elements, allowing for great flexibility in template design. However, for BIP, there are extended **SQL** and **XSL function tags**, for which there are 27 different functions to remember; there are 15 different XSL equivalent tags to remember; there's the **FO tag**, for which there are 41 different elements to remember; oh, and by the way, each of those **FO elements** has a list of supported attributes that it uses, for which there are 21 properties to remember. So, even if we exclude the minor detail about **FO attribute** properties, there are over 80 forms of tags that you have to deal with in BIP!

Even when using the **Template Builder**, BI Publisher's library of tags is complex and nearly impossible to conquer. Again, because AutoTag is less complicated, users do not have to remember dozens of complicated tags to design professional reports.

> **Simplified Tags**
> BIP offers simplified XSL syntax to reduce the complexity of its tags. With Windward, there's no need for simplified syntax – tags are few in number and easy to understand.

Word Features
AutoTag implements many of Word's toolbar features common to most business users. For example, WR supports extensive **Header/Footer** control, image support for fixed or dynamic, linkable images, and 'drag-&drop' capability.

BIP supports all of Word's format features as well as more advanced reporting features such as **AutoShapes**, **Backgrounds**, **Watermark**, conditional formatting, dynamic data columns, and running totals. Unfortunately, many of these features only work in PDF output.

Tag Construction
There are two methods for creating RTF templates in BIP. One is the **Basic rtf Design Method**, which uses any word processor such as MS Word. This method is fairly straightforward, but it does require the user to hand code everything and learn how to use a special user interface. The **Form Field Method** enables the use of Word's **Form Field** feature to hide details of code and make templates cleaner and easier to read.

AutoTag provides similar methods of template design, but the **Insert Tag** tool makes tag construction far simpler than BIP by taking out the work of writing the tags. **Field** style tags also hide the details of the code, making templates much easier to read.

Control Flow
Conditional formatting using **if-statements**, **choose-when-otherwise-statements**, and runtime **Parameters** allow for efficient control flow in BIP. **Choose-When-Otherwise Statements** work like programming language switch statements and allow the user to control the layout based on several conditions, including a default condition. **Parameters** enable users to interact with the report and specify data of interest from the data set (filter data).

AutoTag also provides **if-statements**, which can be easily manipulated to achieve the same results as BIP's "choose-when-otherwise" statements.

Table Formatting
With AutoTag, bannered rows can be created and **if-statements** can be used to achieve conditional formatting in tables. BIP has highly flexible row, column, or whole table formatting capabilities.

Charts
In BIP, charts are easy to create, and allow a high degree of formatting flexibility. BIP also includes custom chart support. AutoTag also provides charting capability by way of a single tag.

Nulls
The syntax for checking nulls in BIP is a complex process. With AutoTag, checking for nulls is easy through the use of a common **if** tag.

Conclusion
From this comparative document, we have learned that BIP is undoubtedly a powerful reporting tool with a lot of interesting capabilities and functionality. However, we have also learned that the BIP system is a complex one with a high learning curve. Because BI Publisher is heavily geared towards developers, Windward Reports is much more suitable for regular business users. AutoTag is such a simple, straightforward application that any business user, technical or non-technical, can feel comfortable and confident using it. While BIP requires its users to download optional installations such as its **Desktop Tools** to aid users in report tasks, Windward provides AutoTag as its 'desktop tool,' which is much easier to set up and implement. While BIP requires its users to study dozens of complicated tags in order to create basic reports, AutoTag employs a handful of tags capable of creating full-scale, professional reports. While BIP is manufactured by a billion dollar corporation, Windward Reports is developed by a personal, customer-driven company – we'll let you guess which software tool will be more adaptable to your budget … We hope to hear from you soon.