

Discovering Discoverer

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Introduction

Its shipped on the Developer CDs along with Jdeveloper, Oracle Reports and Oracle Forms, yet many Companies have still not realised the potential of the Discoverer series of software. This article is intended to outline this package, give ideas of its usage and steer you to using it within your existing portfolio of products using the Oracle Database.

Since its release nearly a decade ago, Oracle's Discoverer software has been quietly gaining support from a large number of Organisations who appreciate its simple easy to use, windows friendly interface and self-service reporting ability for end users. Discoverer is even more enhanced by its cost effective pricing strategy when compared with third party products which have longer set up lead time, increased learning curve and less direct methods of accessing an Oracle database.

As with all software, Discoverer has undergone a series of upgrades but these have always been minor enhancements compared to full scale re-writes, a user of version 3.1 for example would have no problem using the 9i version.

The Discoverer 'family' of software consists of three main elements, the Administrator, Desktop and the Web version.

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Administrator

At present the Administrator package must be installed on a client machine, there is no web version of the product, this is not a product which is rolled out to every member of staff anyway, in fact, in many Organisations only one or two people are involved in the administration of Discoverer.

The Administrator package can be said to be the 'engine room' of Discoverer, it is here that the weird and wonderful designs of the Oracle relational database are taken and put into more conventional, understandable and user friendly shaped data. Think of Administrator as a translator between the DBAs and the users. The DBAs want to store the data in a series of interlinking tables because it is the most efficient, the Users want information from the Database in the easiest and most understandable form, the Discoverer Administrator, who has a role separate from both DBAs and Users will form the link between the two requirements.

Typically, an Administrator will be a joint effort between a User who understands the business requirement and a Developer who will understand the relationships in the physical Database between the various tables and views, or alternatively the role is given to a Developer who has already spent time creating Reports etc for the client.

Administrator Interface

The interface for Administrator is very plain and functional, reflecting its 'backroom' status, the layout of the options is not always intuitive but this is a product designed for a specific role and will have only occasional usage following the intense initial setting up of the End User Layer and Business Areas ...

End User Layer

Creating an EUL is child's play, its fully automatic and providing the Administrator has the correct Database privileges will take less than five minutes to install ... if only everything were this simple in Oracle!! ... have you ever installed Oracle Designer?. The EUL is the collective term for a series of tables which are created in the Administrator's schema, it is these tables which hold the setup information for the various Business Areas etc ... it has the advantage of being backed up with the rest of the Database but can also be exported at will by the Administrator. Under normal circumstances the EUL is created and forgotten about and only ever changed when a new version is released.

Business Area

A Business Area allows the organisation of related database tables into a coherent set of information. A Business Area can be a simple collection of tables or a studied analysis of the business requirement. To be blunt, a business area can be chucked together with little thought of the amount of work a user has to go through to make it into a understandable report or alternatively the

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business area can represent the data in exactly the way the user requires it, removing the need to understand joins etc ...

Desktop

This package is the client version of the front end of Discoverer and has over the years been called a variety of names, Desktop, User or Plus. The bottom line is that it has to be installed on each user's workstation.

Desktop Interface

This has been designed to be familiar to Excel or Lotus 123 spreadsheet users but of course with the added advantage that the data is retrieved by query rather than input by the user, this means that the data is always 'live', never input manually from print offs etc.

The data is always protected too, any changes made by the User such as creating additional columns to manipulate the existing data are held strictly in the Workbook and never committed to the Database.

Workbooks and Worksheets

Discoverer is organised like a spreadsheet package, a file can be saved to the filesystem or alternatively the Database, this will have an extension of .DIS and will consist of a workbook with one or more worksheets, each worksheet accessible via tabs similar to Excel.

The great difference between a spreadsheet and Discoverer is that the data is not stored within the file, merely the shape of the worksheet that will hold the data, this has several distinct advantages in that not only is the saved file very small, it will represent the 'live' data at all times, indeed, the Discoverer workbook will be transportable across Databases providing they hold the same structure of data.

Pivoting

One of the great selling points of Discoverer is the way in which the data can be repositioned within the sheet, this can either be the simple drag and drop of columns within the across access or the more sophisticated pivoting of columns around both the across or down axis, the 'cross tabulation'.

Drilling

Drilling is an important feature of Discoverer, it allows the aggregation of data up and down a chosen hierarchy, this hierarchy could be a simple calendar function allowing the totals to be created by day, month, quarter or year, or the hierarchy can be Administrator defined, perhaps a

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staffing or product structure. The user can begin at any point in the structure and traverse either up or down it.

Another important feature of drilling is what is termed 'hyper-drilling' this allows the Administrator to define 'hot spots' in the End User Layer, which can be clicked on to open different products to read the data. This is ideally suited to the 8i datatypes of Blobs and Clobs.

Exporting

Using Discoverer does not obligate the user to this product, the product is very open ended and allows direct exporting of the data into a variety of different formats, including excel, html and comma separated files, in fact a few DBAs use Discoverer to export entire tables to be used in Access.

Scheduling

Rather than use valuable computer resource during busy times of the day, Discoverer allows the User to schedule workbooks to be run at 'off peak' periods, these prepare the data ready for reading at a later time.

Web

The web version of the User edition has almost the same functionality as the client based desktop version, with some notable differences, these are listed here in no particular order of importance ...

1. Workbooks can only be opened and saved to the Database
2. Exceptions will be displayed but cannot be created in the Web version
3. Only one workbook can be open at any one time
4. Most options are grouped in the pull down menus, limited icons are available.

The main advantage of using the web is the centralisation of the code, unlike the client version, this does not need to be installed on a client machine, the Administrator merely issues the url of the Discoverer home page, of course, more work is done in the background, a web server such as 9ias needs to be set up and each user will need to download the java applet before being able to run the product.

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Where is Discoverer used?

This is a small sample of applications that Discoverer is used in ...

1. Data Warehousing and DataMarts
2. Easier access to HR and Financials Applications (11i)
3. Monitoring of Database usage, including tablespaces etc ...
4. End of Year financial reports
5. A query only substitute for Oracle Forms and Oracle Reports

Is Discoverer for your Organisation?

Can you answer yes to these questions ...

1. Do you have users who need up the minute reports from the Database ?
2. Do you have a limited number of Developers who can help these users ?
3. Are your users able to use Excel or Lotus 123 spreadsheets ?
4. Do you want to cut down on the number of printed reports sent between users ?
5. Do you want your users to have a self-service facility for reporting purposes ?
6. Do you want a low cost reporting tool with the power of the Oracle database behind it ?
7. Do you need a product which can be set up any rolled out within 20 days ?
8. Do you need to give access to the Database from both client and Web with strict security rules ?

How can Seer Computing Ltd help you with Discoverer?

We can train your Administrators and all of your Users, either using our generic courses or to add value we can incorporate your data into the courses.

We can build a collection of starter workbooks and business areas so that the rollout of the product isn't waiting for Developers to learn Administrator.

We can also health check your current EUL and report on anomalies found and suggest ways forward.

We can even host your Data Warehouse for you to access anywhere in the world on the web

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Contact details

Contact us by email ... enquiries@seercomputing.com

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