

REPORT REPRINT

No leap of faith: ASG Technologies' strategy and functionality underscore value of trust

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Introduction

In the wake of the big-data-hype era, the lingering perception that ‘more is better’ can be hard to shake. But as organizations pursue more advanced use cases, it becomes painfully evident that a lack of understanding about data’s provenance and status directly undermines data quality and ultimate outcomes: ‘garbage in, garbage out’ rings ever true. For instance, in 451 Research’s Voice of the Enterprise: AI & Machine Learning, Infrastructure survey from 2019, 38% of respondents reported that ‘data quality’ was a top concern related to the current AI/ML infrastructure supporting workloads within their organization – a concern second only to security. Meanwhile, intensifying global legal mandates for data privacy and protection underscore the need to know where data came from, where it has been, and how it is being used. Without trust in data, all stakeholders lose.

ASG Technologies, with its enterprise information management offerings, has had a historical focus on providing this critical context around data assets, particularly with its Data Intelligence offering. Leveraging a deep, technical approach to metadata management, ASG Technologies helps organizations establish trust in their data. Product enhancements announced in fall 2019 gave organizations further metrics for data trust and reliability, but principles of trust and quality extend to the company’s ongoing customer and partner strategy as well.

451 TAKE

While introduction of the ASG-Zenith digital automation platform may have stolen the show at ASG’s annual EVOLVE conference in late 2019, the company’s foundational capabilities of metadata management – and their continued advancement – only grow in value as organizations face intensifying pressure to surface insight in a governed, defensible manner. The company’s methodical approach to both technology and business strategy has appeal as external forces such as regulations begin to rein in ‘wild west’ approaches to data use and third-party relationships.

A methodical approach, however, does not necessarily mean slow. ASG Technologies must compete effectively with peers that position self-service enablement and frictionless data access as the end to the metadata management means. So while the Data Intelligence offering, in particular, has enormous potential in ultimately facilitating self-service data access and leverage, its value proposition is more nuanced. Communicating effectively to multiple enterprise data stakeholders, in a crowded market, is the challenge.

Context

In 2015, the Florida-based organization formerly known as Allen Systems Group – established in 1986 – was refinanced by a consortium of investors including KKR & Co and Blackstone Group’s credit arm, GSO Capital Partners. The rebranded firm, ASG Technologies, was debuted the following year, and in April 2017, the company received additional growth strategy investment from Elliott Management Corp affiliate Evergreen Coast Capital. Upon further corporate reorganization, the business divided its technology offerings into two primary lines: IT systems management and enterprise information management. ASG-Zenith, a digital automation platform introduced in fall 2019, essentially represents a new – third – line of offerings that draws from elements of both of the other categories.

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In the last three years, the product organization of ASG Technologies has undergone a reorganization and transformation, with business units and roles essentially being aligned under the purview of product. Everything from vision and strategy to customer care is conducted under the same product organization umbrella so that there is cultural alignment and joint ownership of product-related outcomes. Colocation of teams is also a core organizational principle, with nearly all office locations representing a diversified array of work. ASG Technologies' primary 'hubs' combining development and other roles, such as customer care, currently include Purchase, New York (USA), Barcelona (Spain), and Chennai and Hyderabad (India).

A professional services initiative, Global Services, is another area of growth for the company. Currently, there are 120+ Global Services employees spread across 40 locations, with a healthy proportion of 55+ Global Services employees based in North America. The practice is segmented into four core solution areas: pre-sales, learning services, professional services and project management.

Today, the company has roughly 3,500 total customers spread across 60 countries worldwide. A total of about 1,050 ASG Technologies employees are spread across 40+ locations. The company maintains a tightly knit program with 80+ featured partners. Relative to some major competitors, ASG Technologies is smaller in terms of business organization. However, the company uses its size to its benefit: large enough to maintain a global footprint with 'follow the sun' support, while small enough to provide highly personalized customer care.

Strategy

With ASG Technologies' announcement of the ASG-Zenith digital automation platform at the ASG EVOLVE 2019 conference in the fall, it could be easy to overlook the company's broader strategy of trust – both in product functionality and external relationships – that underpins new capabilities. Without reliable, trustworthy enterprise data, automation of processes is futile. And without strong business partner relationships, a 'solution' approach will never meet the needs of highly specialized customers and their unique workflow and industry-specific needs.

Enterprise trust in data

Helping businesses establish trust in their organizational data is the foundation of ASG Technologies' enterprise information management offering strategy, and those capabilities further form the basis for some of the capabilities of the new ASG-Zenith digital automation platform. The Data Intelligence offering – the platform core to the company's information management line – offers a suite of interrelated functions that can help facilitate both proactive outcomes such as analytics enablement and reactive outcomes such as meeting the requirements for regulatory compliance. Capabilities include automated data inventory, identification of sensitive data types, technical and business metadata management, data lineage, a business glossary, data governance, impact analysis and a data catalog.

ASG Technologies is methodical and technical in its handling of metadata; in what the company deems an 'application understanding' approach, Data Intelligence can directly interpret code and map it to the schema of various source databases. To date, over 220 metadata scanners are available, helping organizations implement a technology-agnostic and enterprise-wide strategy for information management. As was reflected by the customer stories at the ASG EVOLVE conference in late 2019, Data Intelligence is currently helping organizations align and converge their defensive and offensive data management use cases so that diverse stakeholders across the board can benefit from better understanding of enterprise data.

Trust in strategic partners

ASG Technologies' partner program is based on the foundational principles of innovation, reach, resources and productivity; partners and their resources are leveraged to offer more specialized and advanced functionality to customers, as well as extend the visibility and sales efforts of the ASG Technologies team. By supporting customers together via a highly collaborative model, productivity and the likelihood of success are increased. Incentives with partners need to be tightly aligned to ensure mutual benefit and customer satisfaction, and ASG Technologies invests heavily in partner training and regular communications.

Over the last two to three years, ASG Technologies has revamped its partner program to increase strength of relationships and ultimately increase channel business. While ASG Technologies initially generated only about 6% of its sales via channel, that number today exceeds 30%, and the business objective is to ultimately reach 40%. With just north of 100 sellers today, ASG Technologies' partner strategy is highly focused on the depth and quality of business relationships rather than simple breadth and variety. A partner solution development framework, anchored with the identification of a market need, kicks off a highly coordinated and collaborative process that brings offerings to market. In-depth meetings with partners at least twice a year underscore transparency and avoidance of conflicts of interest.

Competition

ASG Technologies, with its information management line of offerings and Data Intelligence product, competes directly with many of the providers identified in the 'metadata management' market segment of 451 Research's Data Management Market Map 2019. Competition for ASG Technologies' IT systems management line of products and the ASG-Zenith process automation platform are not specifically discussed here.

For data catalog functionality specifically, a long list of vendors potentially overlap, both with dedicated catalogs and catalogs embedded in broader platforms, as recently noted in 451 Research's overview of the catalog market. Some generally purpose-built offerings include those by Alation, Collibra and Waterline Data, as well as Informatica's dedicated Enterprise Data Catalog offering. Infogix has some functionality overlap with ASG Technologies in that the company offers a mix of metadata management capabilities, including data discovery and a data catalog. Cloud-specific catalogs include those provided by the three hyperscalers: Amazon Web Services, Google and Microsoft. IBM's cloud-native Watson Knowledge Catalog, too, competes on the catalog front. Oracle also offers a catalog for its OCI cloud ecosystem. Data catalogs embedded in data management or analytics platforms include those offered by Alteryx, Cambridge Semantics, Cloudera, DataRobot (via Paxata pickup), Immuta, Qlik (via Podium data assets and subsequent Data Catalyst offering), Salesforce (via Tableau assets) and Zoloni.

Some MDM specialists, such as Ataccama, also offer data catalog and data quality functionality that overlaps and helps achieve similar outcomes. Tamr, which notes data mastering as a common use case, also inherently has metadata management capabilities.

Data lineage specialists, particularly MANTA, compete with ASG Technologies with deep technical analysis of data sources and logs of actions taken on data over time. Smaller upstarts such as Octopai also focus on metadata management across diverse enterprise IT ecosystems and provide some lineage functionality. Collibra, with its 2019 acquisition of SQLdep, added deeper SQL-oriented lineage.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

ASG Technologies understands that deep, code-level understanding of data is the foundation that underpins all meaningful insight within an organization. Technical competency with data inventory and lineage forms the basis for the Data Intelligence offering and accompanying catalog, meeting both reactive and proactive needs for information. The recently introduced ASG-Zenith digital automation platform taps into these capabilities – coordinating people, processes and technology.

WEAKNESSES

ASG Technologies' self-proclaimed focus on 'pragmatic innovation' rather than innovation for innovation's sake could be construed by some to mean the company is more conservative and less willing to pursue the type of high-risk, high-reward development that can translate to breakthrough capabilities. While a methodical approach appeals to large regulated customers, ASG potentially risks falling behind scrappier upstart peers when it comes to leading-edge functionality.

OPPORTUNITIES

The regulatory climate is only growing more complex as data privacy and data protection laws proliferate, favoring providers that can demonstrate granular understanding and control of the enterprise data ecosystem. Intensifying legal precedents will inevitably be set for appropriate control of data, and other metadata management providers may prove insufficient to meet requirements if they lack depth of functionality – providing an opportunity for ASG Technologies.

THREATS

The company's Data Intelligence product competitively faces nimble 'land and expand' vendors that are not afraid to entrench themselves at the departmental level and expand out by appealing directly to the needs and desires of frustrated business users. Even when ASG has superior technical capabilities, consumerization and tribal adoption patterns can be a swift current to swim against. Direct appeal to product end users, in addition to business leadership, will be key for sustained success.