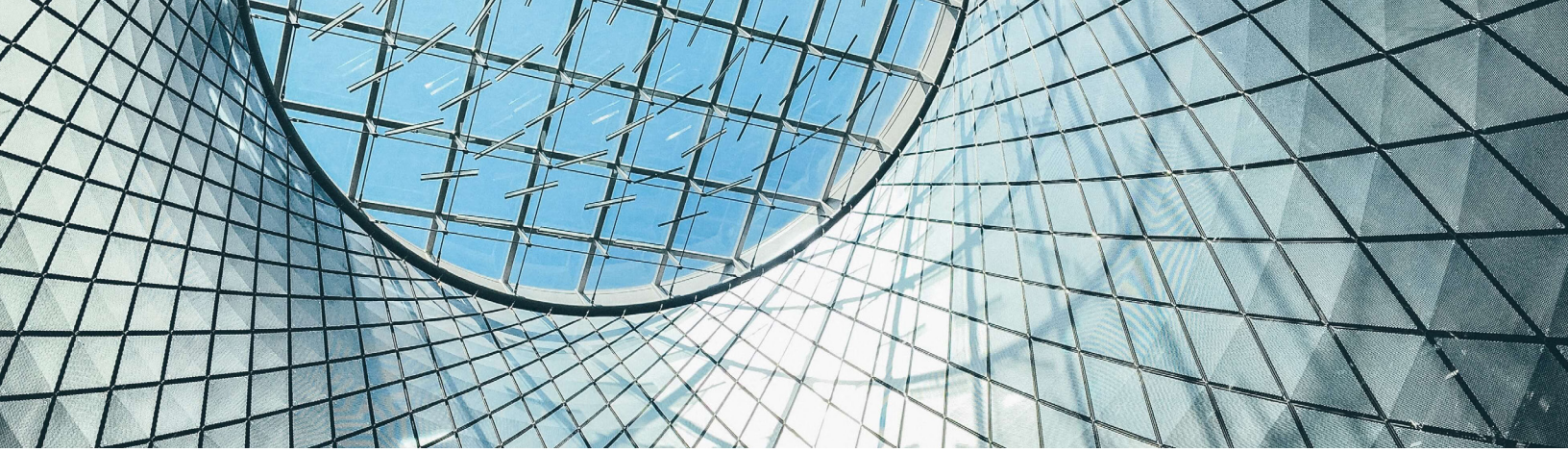

Market Insight Report Reprint

Coverage Initiation: Metaphor Data does not mince words with its social vision for metadata management

August 21 2023

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Enterprise data culture — the ongoing use of and business benefit from data — depends on workers being able to collaborate around relevant data resources. Metaphor spells out that aspect of data: using both automation and human activity to create a feedback loop for data reliability and business benefit.

S&P Global
Market Intelligence

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Introduction

Contemporary socio-technological constructs for organizational data utilization, such as a data mesh, often rely on concepts of decentralized data "ownership" and collaboration around data resources. Different enterprise roles may share or delegate data management responsibilities. For example, according to 451 Research's Voice of the Enterprise: Data & Analytics, Data-Driven Practices 2022 and Voice of the Enterprise: Data & Analytics, Data Governance & Privacy 2022 surveys, 65.4% of respondents report that their organization has a dedicated data engineering function, but only 47.8% report that their organization has a data steward role or function. Data management functions thus are often a team sport that require coordination across roles and teams, tapping diverse individuals for subject matter expertise.

Metaphor Data is seeking to bring a sense of social literacy to the metadata management effort, leading with an automated data catalog that aims to engage enterprise workers via a highly consumerized user experience (UX) and collaborative data management features. The company's goal is to enable business users to collaborate to manage the consistency and reliability of data, as well as to realize the full potential of data in their downstream analytics and insight efforts.

THE TAKE

With the metadata management market segment getting a bit crowded — most large data management platforms already have a catalog layer — it requires some form of pointed differentiation for pure-play metadata management specialists to stand out. Metaphor takes the stance that collaborative feedback loops and overall worker productivity with data define success in data management; the company's consumerized UX may appeal directly to enterprise end users, who have growing influence in the IT procurement process.

Metaphor's social data catalog is potentially a good match for organizations that use data mesh methodology or similar decentralized data utilization frameworks because these organizational approaches depend heavily on the ability to evaluate data for relevancy and trust, share institutional knowledge, and collaborate around data subject-matter expertise. However, the vendor's challenge may be one of addressable market: Many enterprise organizations already have IT investments in data catalogs or data catalog layers. Architectural compatibility and exceptional product usability will need to be areas of continued focus.

Context

Metaphor is a startup that traces its roots to late 2020, spun off of a metadata management platform project at LinkedIn, where the founders (Pardhu Gunnam, Mars Lan and Seyi Adebajo) originally met trying to build a rudimentary data catalog. The need for better data stewardship and navigation was apparent at LinkedIn, where the organization wanted to bring visibility to data, particularly for compliance use cases. LinkedIn took on a metadata-led approach to privacy compliance for regulations such as GDPR, using automation for data tagging, with PrivacyOps methodology as a goal. While automation of policy-related tagging and classification became a strength for LinkedIn, automated enforcement of data policy was often the missing link for execution because the systems that had been designed for visibility could not exert control directly on the data.

Metaphor was started because of the convergence of these data management functions; the visibility and control required to support data-driven initiatives is the same visibility and control necessary to support more "reactive" functions such as security and privacy compliance. Collaboration is required.

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In this sense, Metaphor in its present iteration is a metadata management company built around a highly collaborative and automated data catalog with a consumer-grade UX, which facilitates the democratization and visibility of data within the organization. The company's model is to essentially crowdsource subject-matter expertise with regard to data relevancy and usage, so that the data governance effort can be successfully decentralized to support other data-driven activities. The data catalog integrates directly into enterprise data sources for upstream organizational data visibility and control, but also into enterprise social and collaborative channels for downstream process and workflow management.

Metaphor today has a relatively modest headcount of 13 employees, who have a collective experience of several decades in the data and analytics industry. The company raised a seed round most recently in April. The total funding to date has come to roughly $10.3 million from Amplify Partners, Andreessen Horowitz and Point72 Ventures. Metaphor is based in the Bay Area in California, and primarily has clients based in North America.

Platform

The flagship Metaphor platform is positioned as a social platform for data. This positioning largely revolves around self-service catalog functionality that helps users navigate and understand the business context of information while collectively crowdsourcing and contributing to the data governance effort.

Metaphor's product functionality is anchored via three foundational concepts: collaboration by design, data literacy and enablement, and agile data governance. As such, the entire UX is designed with the needs of diverse workers and data stakeholders in mind. The interface and UX have been crafted to be highly consumerized, so that the skills barrier to participation with the product is extremely low; even nontechnical line-of-business users can use the catalog to discover and navigate data resources or collaborate with their colleagues. However, a native set of APIs allows the product to be used in programmatic ways and to be embedded into other applications. Rather than just layering a message board on top of existing software, everything in the Metaphor platform is designed to be collaborative by design; the goal is to drive knowledge exchange and cooperation around enterprise data.

Technically, the Metaphor platform is designed to be simple to deploy and, as mentioned above, simple to use. Deployed as a SaaS platform with multi-tenant, single-tenant or VPC options, Metaphor integrates with the customer's data stack, including connectors and integrations for categories of technology including authentication, business intelligence, cloud platforms, communication, data lakes, data quality, data warehouses, databases, ETL/ELT and orchestration. As opposed to some traditional catalog environments with limited direct data connectivity — where the catalog view is rarely up to date — Metaphor touts more of a direct, live connectivity model for data that allows end users to see exactly what is available and relevant to them at that point in time.

The platform offers benefits for a wide array of end users; data engineers get dashboard descriptions plus table and column descriptions. Subject matter experts, analytics engineers and data engineers benefit from features such as metrics, business glossaries, data dictionaries and onboarding guides. Nearly everyone else in the company can benefit from the automated insight and ways that Metaphor embeds into native enterprise communications channels such as Teams (Microsoft Corp.) and Slack (Salesforce Inc.). Metaphor's Web Plugin also allows BI tool users to understand "trust signals" related to the relevancy and quality of data, as well as to access documentation and ask questions about data without leaving the BI tool interface.

Taking more of a holistic platform approach, Metaphor is technically able to integrate with existing enterprise metadata management investments, including other catalogs, such as Databricks' Unity Catalog. However, this is not currently a key area of focus for Metaphor. Automation, however, is an emphasis. The Metaphor platform uses AI primarily to help reduce the burden of monotonous and repetitive work. For example, the Smart Summarization feature allows preservation of data-related institutional knowledge from Slack/Teams conversations with a single click, while the automatic documentation generation feature allows creation of documentation using generative AI. Furthermore, natural language search allows less technical users to ask questions about data directly in Slack/Teams and get answers without needing to switch UI context or go to the web application.

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Competition

Functionally speaking, Metaphor primarily competes in the data management market as a self-service data catalog, placing it squarely in the metadata management segment as defined by our Data Management Market Map and Data Management Market Monitor. However, the company's collaborative approach to data stewardship also has strong elements of data governance, pushing the company into that market segment as well.

Notable stand-alone catalogs and metadata management platforms on the market include Acryl Data, Alation, Alex Solutions, Collibra and data.world. Acryl Data is worth mentioning for its similar breadth of UX scope as well as emphasis on data governance and data observability/quality. Collibra is notable for its heritage in data governance functionality, and data.world for its similar emphasis on social and collaborative catalog functionality.

Some formerly stand-alone catalogs have been acquired and absorbed into broader data management platforms, as is the case with Hitachi Vantara's 2020 acquisition of Waterline Data; the technology was folded into Hitachi Vantara's Lumada platform. Informatica Inc. has long had its Enterprise Data Catalog product, and other tuck-in acquisitions over the years have helped the company bolster adjacent technology around functions such as data governance and privacy. IBM Corp. also offers its Watson Knowledge Catalog as part of the data and analytics-oriented Cloud Pak for Data. Cloudera's SDX governance layer includes metadata management features and a data catalog that are partially evolved out of technology assets from the company's 2018 acquisition of Hortonworks. Rocket Software, which acquired ASG Technologies in 2021, also has a data catalog layer in its data intelligence software. In July 2023, Teradata acquired Stemma with the intent to build out a catalog layer.

In the context of collaboration, Tableau, owned by Salesforce, is primarily analytics-oriented but includes a native catalog layer and rich collaboration features. In terms of novel architectures, Cinchy also competes as a highly collaborative social data platform. While not positioned as a data catalog in the traditional sense, Cinchy's zero-copy "dataware" architecture seeks to address key pain points in data integration, data governance, data quality, data security and data privacy.

SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

Data management efforts, and especially data governance efforts, cannot succeed if they are the responsibility of a select few with limited resources. Metaphor understands the social and collaborative inertia of data culture, and has designed a platform to maximize productivity of and engagement with data resources. A focus on data governance provides appropriate guardrails.

WEAKNESSES

Metaphor is early-stage and small. While it may have a modernized vision for what a data catalog should be, its voice is relatively muted in a market populated with much more entrenched players. As far as data catalogs go, connectivity and system compatibility are key determinants of customer success; Metaphor, still growing, is working to expand its suite of connectivity for the platform.

OPPORTUNITIES

Highly data-driven organizations are beginning to realize there is a strong correlation between data governance and data productivity: The former is not just a compliance requirement. By tapping into the social aspect of data use while minding governance needs, Metaphor seems well poised to capture the interest of these savvy organizations that are looking to actively build out their data culture.

THREATS

In the broader data management and data platform markets, nearly every vendor wants to provide a data catalog layer in its ecosystem. This makes small startup or stand-alone data catalog providers potentially attractive acquisition targets. Once a stand-alone data catalog is baked into another vendor's platform, there is always the risk that there may be some loss of integration or compatibility with existing systems.

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