

## Feature

# Of CEOs and Executive Dashboards

*CIOs share insights on what their bosses look for when it comes to executive dashboards By Rajendra Chaudhary*

Just like a car dashboard tells the driver all that he needs to know in order to drive the car safely and reach his destination, business dashboards provide top executives with the information that they require to drive business operations in a safe and sound manner. As old an analogy as it may be, it has never been truer. Dashboards are a great way of providing visibility into a firm's operations. Needless to say, they are primarily meant for senior business executives and those spearheading business operations and not necessarily for the folks in the lower rungs of the office hierarchy. Typically this lot includes the CEOs, MDs, Directors and Sr. VPs and the like. Therefore, it becomes vital to ensure that these dashboards contain all the right pieces of information that these individuals need to do their jobs properly and that's where it gets a bit tricky.



## What do CEOs want?

Figuring out what the inhabitants of an organization's 'C' suite want from their dashboards has long been a topic of interest for CIOs who are responsible for delivering the same. Over the years, CIOs from various business verticals have identified certain elements, which business heads might want to see in their dashboards.

Having deployed executive dashboards in his previous job at PepsiCo India, Manoj Madhavan, Head-IT, L'Oreal India proposed a dashboard quite suited to an FMCG company's CEO. Sharing his perspective Madhavan said, "The most effective dashboard is the one that gives the CEO a business performance summary based on the KPIs for the business. CEOs look for an uncluttered view that helps them deduce the information and quickly take effective decisions."

Referring to his own sector of the industry i.e. FMCG, he said that A snapshot of something which gives the sales target vs. achievement, profit target vs. achievement, top five best and worst performing brands, best and worst performing sales areas and other similar pieces of information could be useful in a CEO's dashboard.

Typically, CEOs whether from the FMCG space or any other industry vertical tend to look for a handful of key metrics in their dashboards. Essentially, these metrics help them get a sense of the overall health of the business on a regular basis. Most of these metrics are common across the board and include sales numbers, performance of teams across different business functions, customer service, competition's performance etc.

Not limiting his views to a specific industry sector, Ananthakrishnan, Head-Information Systems & Technology, Gateway Terminals India talked about management by exceptions. "The dashboard per se is a vehicle for meeting certain expectations. As one goes up the organizational ladder, he or she generally looks for management by exception. The CEO and senior business managers appreciate it if one can bring out instances of exceptions in the dashboards. For example, an operations guy would like to see the areas that are working as they should, or a sales head would like to see the non-performers and a commercial guy would like to see customers who have not met the contractual terms and so on."

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**Ananthakrishnan**  
Head-Info. Systems & Technology,  
Gateway Terminals India



Besides this, many a times dashboards reflect an individual's personal management style (this is especially true of CEOs) and, in those scenarios, CIOs may have to come up with something that is completely different from the norm.

### Vendor insight

#### "Current reporting/dashboard creation tools don't suffice user needs"

Currently CEOs and senior business managers might have to depend on the reports from their transactional application or on the reports that are built by the IT team on their request.



Sometimes IT teams use software which is not meant for creating dashboards at all. Even in cases where they use a proper tool, things can go wrong and CIOs can underestimate what it takes to promote effective adoption and maintain active usage of dashboards. This often results in incomplete, inaccurate, and untimely data in dashboards that, in turn, leads to inaccurate business decisions as business executives are unable to identify the most important things to measure. Even a good dashboard creation tool can fail to deliver if there is high dependence on data warehousing, lack of executive sponsorship or poor design.

- **Sanjay Mehta**, CEO, MAIA Intelligence

### Key challenges and remedies

As challenging as it can be finding out what business heads want to see in their dashboards, there are other challenges that a CIO has to face up to when delivering executive dashboards. Deciding "how much information is too much?" for an executive dashboard is one such challenge. Put a lot of information in a dashboard and you will have the user scratching his head, while at the same time too little of it will render the effort useless.

Instances of 'information overkill' occur when one tries to put all of the business KPIs in a single view. A typical measure to check the readability of a dashboard can be the time taken to go through one and make quick business sense out of it. Any KPI which is not high impact and high priority can and must be moved to drill downs or to another view, which is not the primary dashboard view. CIOs should identify anywhere between 5-10 key measurements or key performance indicators that are

the most important for the business and prioritize them and then see how they can be placed in the final design without cluttering the view. For this, prototyping is the most effective way to find out what gives the best optimized view for a dashboard.

When asked about what he felt was the most challenging aspect of delivering business dashboards at his company, Titus Gunaseelan, Director – IT, JM Financial, cited integration as one of his biggest pain points.

"Since executive dashboards often have to deal with multiple information systems in the organization, integration at the backend can be a challenge."

**Titus Gunaseelan**  
Director – IT, JM Financial



"Since executive dashboards often have to deal with multiple information systems in the organization, integration at the backend can be a challenge, especially if you have legacy systems in place that are closed and whose APIs aren't exposed. In such a scenario, it becomes difficult to get data from various applications and display it in a single dashboard," said Gunaseelan.

In scenarios where an organization uses multiple sources with different data structures, integration is bound to be a challenge. However, experts suggested that this issue could be resolved to a great extent by opting for a dashboard tool that could link to different databases. Nevertheless, while a good dashboard platform could address integration issues, there are no quick fixes for data quality issues. If adequate attention is not paid to managing data quality within the different data sources, the overall exercise will yield little in terms of impact. CIOs therefore must pay attention to the quality of data residing within various data sources.

Conversations with CIOs also revealed challenges at the presentation layer and intuitive design as one of the prerequisites for modern business dashboards. Sudip Banerjee, CTO & Head - Online Sales, Reliance General Insurance stressed that dashboards, unlike spreadsheets, needed to be impactful and, therefore, while designing one, an attractive and interactive user interface was a must.

"While a dashboard must allow easy access to information in a comprehensive manner, CIOs should also pay attention to how the information is presented."

**Sudip Banerjee**  
CTO & Head - Online Sales,  
Reliance General Insurance



"While a dashboard must allow for easy access to information in a correct and comprehensive manner, CIOs should also pay attention to how the information is presented. Using color, charts, diagrams, etc. greatly help in the user getting the desired overview of the business and being able to focus attention to where performance falls short of expectations," Banerjee said.

In addition to using pie charts, bar charts, speed dials, and gauges, heat maps can also be used since they are intuitive and provide a better overview of concurrent data dimensions. Besides, an attractive user interface also leads to user acceptance and the increased usage of the dashboards.

Delivering business dashboards successfully is as much about overcoming management challenges as it is about dealing with technology related issues such as integration and UI design. One of the bigger challenges is about coordinating efforts between different stakeholders that are involved in the process. Project delivery teams sometimes struggle due to the lack of commitment of executive sponsors which, in turn, leads to the unavailability of resources during the design, development, and testing phases.

Such challenges can be addressed with a project management approach that places emphasis

upon change management activities. CIOs need to ensure that there is better communication between different functions and that everyone is clear on what is to be expected from the dashboard solution and that prospective users are encouraged to participate in the exercise as much as possible.

### Vendor insight

#### **“A good dashboard offers role-based KPIs”**

Any high performance executive dashboard should provide a role-based, secure, customizable and extensible environment that is easy to administer and use. Decision makers should be able to view KPIs at a glance so that they can help users monitor anything that drives organizational performance. A high performance dashboard provides extensive and robust

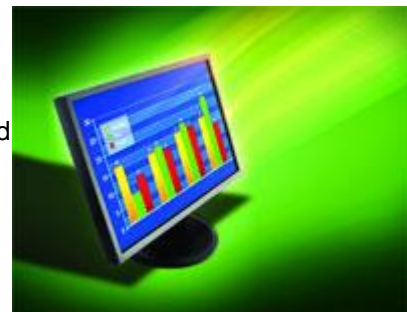


visualization capabilities that help organizations take full advantage of information assets through dynamic, interactive visualization environments, a comprehensive library of graphics for presentations and the generation of customizable graphics. Leaders should be able to interact with visual environments to explore ideas, investigate patterns and discover previously hidden facts through visual queries. Providing business users with this level of self-sufficiency reduces the over-dependence on IT to service ad hoc requests, which require point solutions that are not integrated with core BI investments.

**- Sudipta K. Sen**, Regional Director - South East Asia, CEO & MD, SAS Institute (India)

### A good dashboard

At a recent gathering of CIOs, during a discussion on business dashboards, participants were asked to define what they thought was a good dashboard. Among those present was a CEO. Lending his thoughts to the debate, he said that a good dashboard was one that executives actually used. Explaining, he said that to be useful a dashboard had to be designed and implemented in such a way that it never lost sight of the business' needs. “While some of its attributes can be influenced by the users and technology, its functionalities must always be determined by the business' needs,” he said.



We asked the CIOs to highlight what they thought were the primary attributes of a good dashboard and they cited several key characteristics as being critical to a good business dashboard.

According to Gateway Terminals' Ananthkrishnan, “A good dashboard is one which gives the user all the information in a clear and unambiguous manner, without the need of him having to work for it. It should be presented in a standardized format so that the information can be easily understood and analyzed as per the requirement. Moreover, it should be able to update information fairly regularly, depending on the nature of your business.”

One of the key attributes of a good dashboard is zero user training. It's not good if you have to train executives on how to go about using the dashboard. Another key attribute is that the first page that you hit upon has to have everything. It should give the user pretty much everything that he requires to update himself or take a business decision, Power users like CEOs don't always have the time to drill down and look for information, therefore a good CEO dashboard would be one where all the key pieces of information are there on the main page.

As per Ajay Srivastava, CIO, Spice Mobility a good executive dashboard needs to provide a balanced mix of overview and detailed information so that exceptions can be easily identified and further investigated. He also suggested that the dashboards should integrate with spreadsheets since they could be used for presenting detailed subsets of information post analysis.

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**Ajay Srivastava**  
CIO, Spice Mobility



Emphasizing on the 'simplicity' aspect Srivastava said, "A good business dashboard will always be simple and present an uncluttered view for the user so that he can view the information and go about his job in the shortest possible time."

### **In the end**

As businesses continue to realize the criticality of executive dashboards and how they can play a crucial role in deciding the strategic course of the overall organization, CIOs must ensure that the dashboards they build offer executives the 'visibility' that they seek into the business' operations. This can only happen if the dashboards are 'connected' to the processes that they measure. This is easier said than done. Also, a CIO's task isn't complete once the dashboard has been delivered. Rather it only marks the beginning of the next phase, which involves frequently checking the dashboards for relevance and ensuring that it stays useful and creates visibility into additional dimensions of the business.

rajendra.c@expressindia.com

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