

Business dashboards: From information to insight

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Regarded as the face of [business intelligence \(BI\)](#), [dashboards](#) play a vital role in giving an overview of important business processes.

However, there is more to [business dashboards](#) than merely as tools to 'beautify' reports. Ideally, dashboards should have a business purpose. Whether an Excel sheet or an SAP ECC or a BI dashboard, these tools should ideally be able to lead business leaders and managers to direct action path(s). In fact, that is expected of any BI system and the rule extends to business dashboards as well.

Moreover, business dashboards can, in fact, play a vital role in tough market conditions. For example, during the recent economic slowdown, managing the bottom line proved to be a huge challenge for several companies. As a result, focus was to retain customers and to optimize production. While production needed to be trimmed in accordance with dip in demand, it had to be enough to maintain the existing demand. In such a scenario, [business dashboards can help](#) corporate leaders by representing data in such a fashion that the decision-making process becomes quick and easy.

In case of any analytical tool, especially business dashboards that work with the timeline of data, executives generally get blinded by the hindsight provided by historical data, and thus, the predictive value of the tool is lost. Additionally, dashboards are decision enablers. In fact, a business dashboard should act as a reflective mirror of the past and accurately point to the future as well.

1) How much is necessarily too much?

Generally, executives tend to get overwhelmed by the amount of data and presentations they need, or would want to be displayed on their business dashboards. It needs to be realized that more data involves more money, and correspondingly more time for report generation. So, one needs to assess whether this is practical. A hierarchy of responsibility should be factored in while defining the way [the business dashboards work](#). While summaries of the operation controller can be 18 pages, the report for a vice-president should not exceed 5-6 pages. Similarly, for the CEO it should not be more than two to three pages. In an ideal scenario, the CEO should not spend more than an hour evaluating the data on the business dashboard.

2) Who should ideally have a dashboard?

Basically, the [term dashboard](#) is borrowed from the automobile industry. Thus, it can be said that the person who 'drives' a business would necessarily require a dashboard. This, in turn, also

implies that anyone who needs an overview of the process that one is handling would require a business dashboard.

What one can access from the data on the business dashboard can be limited to the job one manages.

3) How many are ideal: single and generic or multiple but specific?

Imagine, what would happen if the same business dashboard depicting the same information is given to everyone? There may not be any difference between a system's report and a dashboard. Ideally, different business managers have differentiated data needs and would, therefore, need different dashboards.

So, the business dashboard of a CEO will need to reflect data that is different from that on the dashboard of a CFO or a CIO.

However, although there are various [business dashboards for different CXOs](#), there must be a single thread, for example, KPI, that joins all the business dashboards together. In this case, the KPIs will be the glue that links all the dashboards, along with the KPIs they represent, together.

4) What are dashboards expected to deliver?

Generally, for a business dashboard, there are four to five main business parameters, like profits, improved customer service, lower attrition rates, among others, that need to be given focus. These parameters will depend on what is being reviewed. However, deep drilling of the parameter can later be taken on.

The business dashboard should codify areas according to priority that is, based on the level of action that those areas require.

The CEO is the buck's end and s/he should have a sharp yet small dashboard; but if called for, s/he should be able to explore more data at will. S/he should have the capacity to watch and find out if his subordinates are representing the truth or making it up. The [business dashboard should facilitate some sort of transparency](#).

However, the specific dashboarding needs of mature businesses may vary from the fledgling ones.

Moreover, the business dashboards endorsed by an organization will also depend on its own growth outlook.

Lastly, while other business processes may run from the bottom up, a business dashboard needs to align with a top to bottom approach. But since the data is built up from the bottom, the people who create/ build it have to be responsible for their part.

This article is based on inputs from a panel discussion hosted by MAIA Intelligence. The panelists included:

- 1) Alok Jajodia, Group Director, Mondial IT Consultants
- 2) Ananthakrishnan Ganesan, Head IT, Gateway Terminals
- 3) Ashley Isaac, Senior Manager, Information Management Practice, Datamatics Global Services
- 4) Ashok Malhotra, Director, Mettler Toledo
- 5) Dilip Kumar Sahu, VP - India Sales, Datamatics Global Services
- 6) Himanshu Manroa, Lead manager - Research & Analytics, Datamatics Global Services
- 7) Hiten Rathod, Head - Strategic Alliances & Channels, MAIA Intelligence
- 8) Jawed Khan, Head IT, Allana Group
- 9) Kaushal Gal, Strategic Engagement Manager, Microsoft Corporation
- 10) Mani Mulki, CIO, Pidilite Industries
- 11) Mukesh Thumar, CEO, Paramatrix Technologies
- 12) Prakash Pawar, CIO, Intrex India
- 13) Rajesh Nair, CIO, APM Terminals
- 14) Subhash Palkar, Advisor IT Initiatives, Indofil Industries
- 15) Suryakant Nanaware, CEO, S&S Infotech & Software
- 16) Titus Gunaseelan, Director - IT, JM Financial.

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