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I have spent a lot of time looking at dashboards lately. See, I've been test driving new cars to see what might replace my 10-year old van now that carpool days are behind me. Car makers give us dashboards in a variety of colors and layouts, and each seems to have one or two items they give more prominence. The ones I like most show what's most important to me. Knowing my RPMs at 70 mph might be cool, but watching that gauge tell me I can go another 100 miles before I'm out of gas … or that I'm heading north when I was supposed to be going south, has more immediate benefit to me.

As different as they might be from model to model, you wouldn't drive a car without a dashboard. It would be like driving in the dark with no guidance. And so it is with the other dashboards in your life. How would you follow your retirement investments if you couldn't see the dashboard of your holdings, recent activity and year-to-date when you log in to check on your 401(k)?

In business, dashboards are emerging as the new face of Business Intelligence. Dashboards let us consolidate information about the health of our business, our department, our branch or more, in a graphical format that is concise and easy to read. They also come in different colors and shapes, with names like Performance dashboard, Executive dashboard, Balanced Scorecard, KPI metric summary or Corporate dashboard. The goal? To showcase the facts in a way that empowers the user to make more intelligent decisions based on better information.

If you have dashboards at work, it is important that the information be meaningful to you. A dashboard used by upper management, for example, might have a top-level view of key metrics such as cash balance, income period to date and year to date, comparatives to last year, top 10 customers, or top 10 popular sales items. On the

other hand, a dashboard for the warehouse manager might show items where stock

and the individual users. Think of how you might watch a decorating show to get ideas for your next home renovation. Get ideas from what others have done with dashboards to identify what data is most important. Then sketch it out before it goes off to design.

2. Go for Graphical. The easiest way to grasp the meaning of a lot of data quickly is through graphs. In an accounting world, this also helps non-accountants better understand vital information, such as sales per employee.

3. Go for Grid Design. It is the standard for most dashboards — a template that allows you to control what information shows up in each section.

4. The most important information goes on top of the screen so it easy to see, such as Key Performance Indicators (KPIs).

5. Lay out information in a logical fashion and group related items through the use of colors, labels and borders. This enables an accounting manager to see all customer stats in one grid section — top customers and account aging — while personnel information is in a separate section.

6. Go for interactive, where appropriate. This could be as basic as the ability to drill down into an aging report to view unpaid invoices, or the ability to move a gauge on the dashboard to see "what if" analysis, such as "What's the impact on the bottom line if I sell 100 more?"

7. If you use Microsoft Excel in the development of your dashboard, be sure to take advantage of the multiple tabs to segregate data views.

8. Make your dashboards readable. Color in graphics can improve readability, as does highlighting and bolding. Be careful about squeezing in more than can be easily read.

Dashboards can have some real high-level differences. A SharePoint dashboard can

do their job. A dashboard for a sales manager, for example, might show each sales rep and their stats for this period, a comparison to last period and year to date. It might show potential sales are in the pipeline, what sales closed this period and the amounts.

We use dashboards in our consulting department — one created in a combination of Crystal using KnowledgeSync. Management's view shows team information, and the consultant's view is personalized to the specific individual. Consultants are like other personal service firms, such as accountants and lawyers, who need to know the work they have done for the period, what type of work was done, and how much was billable versus education or admin. Both views let us compare this month to last month and recognize the top clients by activity. For companies working projects, the dashboard should show project status, highlighting those that are over budget or at risk for missing a deadline.

Some specific software tools are also dashboards. The Microsoft Application Virtualization Dashboard, for example, measures information on your virtual servers such as the top applications used, who are the top users, which applications are not used (so they can be decommissioned) and what is the total system utilization.

The bottom line on dashboards is that they need to be meaningful to the user. The car companies have spent a lot of money on dashboard design and features to be sure they connect with potential buyers. Be sure your users can easily navigate with their dashboards, and we can all become better drivers in today's more challenging business world.

Want to learn more about Dashboards? Here are some great places to start:

Microsoft SharePoint Dashboards —

DataSelf — works with several ERP systems — www.dataself.com

ERP imbedded – Microsoft Dynamics Business Portal — www.microsoft.com/downloads/en/details.aspx?FamilyID=172D04F0-A0FF-421B-9907-2DE4E8EB87F8&displaylang=en

ERP imbedded – MAS 90/200/500 Business Insights Dashboard and MAS Intelligence — www.sagemas.com/assets/SageMAS/pdf/MAS_90_200_Business_Insights_Spec.pdf

InfoCaptor dashboard tool — www.infocaptor.com

Corda Centerview dashboard tool — www.corda.com/dashboard-software.php

Dundas dashboard tool — www.dundas.com

Dashboards by Example blog — www.dashboardsbyexample.com

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