

Executive 'dashboards'

Instant computer-screen information for your business **Interviewed by Marcia Passos Duffy**

Anyone who drives a car knows the importance of a dashboard. It tells you how fast you are going, your fuel level, and if there's something wrong with the car.

Executive dashboards, while on a desktop computer rather than a car, give management the same real-time, at-a-glance information critical to making decisions, such as how fast revenue is coming in, expenses for the quarter, inventory levels and more.

"Without the monitoring and instant feedback provided by the executive dashboard, management has to rely on human communication, which can be unreliable," says Robert Garrett, director of software development for Perpetual Technologies Inc. of Indianapolis. "Problems could go unannounced by employees for days, weeks or even months before the management team hears about it and formulates solutions."

Smart Business spoke with Garrett about the key elements of a good executive dashboard, and how you can best utilize a dashboard to keep your business on the right road.

What are executive dashboards?

Executive dashboards are data-driven software products designed to perform the same two functions as the automotive dashboard. Much like your car's dashboard monitors your car, the executive dashboard monitors your business. It provides an up-to-date view of various monitors installed throughout the business process. Indicators might show a company's revenue, profit, expenses, sales, client satisfaction index or infrastructure status. The list of possible indicators is endless. Critical alerts triggered by these monitors can appear on the dashboard.

As you might imagine, executive dashboards vary greatly in function, depending on industry and audience.

Why it is crucial for an executive to have a dashboard?

An executive dashboard can provide a view of revenues or alerts for a given infrastructure. A dashboard might inform upper management if sales targets are being met on a daily basis. Perhaps a factory's Q&A depart-



Robert Garrett

Director of software development
Perpetual Technologies Inc.

ment is not meeting production quota, the Web application is performing too slowly to service online customers, or a section of the internal network is down. These are all items that can be reported quickly via an executive dashboard.

Who in a company can benefit from using executive dashboards?

Executive dashboards are primarily used in management, but also have an audience of system, network and database administrators. Certain dashboard products can provide very specific views of the infrastructure. These views might allow management to pinpoint problem areas and take appropriate action quickly, thus minimizing financial impact to the organization.

Management is using executive dashboards for quick notification of problems that affect the bottom line. Quick response to these problems is critical to keep a company running smoothly.

Network, system and database administrators use dashboards for notification of problems that affect the infrastructure that they manage. Quick response to infrastructure issues keeps clients and management happy, and the company running smoothly.

Employees can use dashboards as

well. For example, an inventory-tracking system notifies the employee when it's time to reorder a particular product.

What are some of the reasons to purchase an executive dashboard solution?

By using executive dashboards, managers can:

1) Increase company revenue and profits by improving inefficiencies identified by the dashboard.

2) Make more well-informed and effective decisions.

3) Generate detailed reports in a matter of seconds (financials, sales results, growth, expenses, etc.).

4) View up-to-date data categorized by region, department, division or nearly any conceivable attribute.

What should a company look for when selecting a dashboard product?

The right executive dashboard product is a low-maintenance, automated system. It analyzes business processes, tracks performance, displays and sends alerts, builds and delivers reports, and provides a business with intimate knowledge of itself. Companies should review many dashboard products and choose one which most closely provides the type of monitoring needed. Developers can build custom monitors to meet unique needs.

What are some of the advances being made in executive dashboards?

As companies gain intimate knowledge of certain industries we can expect to see more industry-tailored solutions right out of the box. In the coming years, look for software companies to offer dashboards which are pre-configured to industry. These solutions will require less custom development to deploy. This equates to more features for less money.

ROBERT GARRETT is director of software development for Perpetual Technologies Inc., an IT service provider based in Indianapolis that specializes in Oracle databases and Oracle applications on UNIX platforms. Reach him at info@perptech.com or (317) 824-0393.

Insights Technology is brought to you by Perpetual Technologies Inc.