Effective Deployment

of a Management Dashboard

ROCC Computers White Paper

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What is a Dashboard?

Management dashboards, or executive information systems can help an organisation achieve its goals by monitoring it's performance against it's objectives. Used and deployed correctly, a dashboard can align an organisation or team, focusing everyone's efforts on common goals and ensuring visibility of performance and allow tracking of the organisations key performance indicators (KPI's).

Like a car dashboard a management dashboard is normally a collection of graphical displays which are intended to draw attention to important information. A well designed and developed dashboard should collate data from various disparate systems and present a unified view of the information to the screen to enable the user to have a clear picture of their business.

Fig 1 – A dashboard collates information from many disparate systems

Dashboards can be a powerful management tool allowing users to quickly spot problems before they adversely affect the business. However, managers should not just jump into deploying a dashboard until they have adequately planned how the software is to be used and by whom.

Deciding Upon Metrics

All dashboard deployments begin with the requirement to improve organisational performance, however before moving ahead organisations need to carefully evaluate what metrics they need to measure, how they will measure them and who will be doing it. For example many dashboards only allow for real time reflections of a companies performance, in other words what is the current state. This might be perfectly acceptable if you are monitoring whether a network is available or not but if you are measuring the performance of your sales team you may want to compare today's data with yesterdays, or last weeks or last years.

Selecting the Right Dashboard

Choosing the right dashboard for an organisations needs is key. There are three main types of management dashboard which are on the market today; these are stand alone software applications, web-browser based applications and desktop widgets.

Depending upon who you are deploying to and for what purpose, each dashboard type has its own merits although the web-browser based dashboard is the most commonly used due to it's ease of deployment (requiring nothing more than a web browser) and it's familiarity to users experienced with using the internet. However, managers should carefully evaluate web-based dashboards to ensure they will be available to all staff that require them. Some dashboards may only display on certain types of web browser, such as Microsoft Internet Explorer and therefore would be unusable to any users trying to run the dashboard from Apple Mac's.

Also consider where the data is coming from. A management dashboard that only communicates with Microsoft's SQL Server is of little use if some of your key data is stored in an Oracle database. Ensure the dashboard selected can communicate effectively with many data sources and that it can display information from all your data sources in a single or set of views.

Fig 2 – Dashboards need to be able to communicate with many technologies

Effective Setup and Deployment

Once the metrics have been defined and a dashboard system selected the next stage is to plan the deployment. Ensuring the dashboard is deployed correctly is critical in ensuring the potential benefits of using a dashboard can be realised.

Is the dashboard going to be rolled out to the CEO only, all managers or even all staff. Many dashboards are only ever seen on manager's screens however it is important to consider the effects of allowing all staff to see a dashboard. There can be great performance increases when all staff can track the performance of their department or the company. Staff can feel empowered and may see the difference they are personally making in real time. However proceed with caution if rolling dashboards out to all staff especially if you are monitoring individuals. Publicly highlighting individual performance can lead to morale issues.

Once you have determined who is going to be viewing the dashboard you need to determine what information to show them. You may have many measurements being tracked however do all users need to see them or how often do they need to see them. Many people agree that no more than 6 separate metrics should be displayed to the user at any one time and if more than 6 are shown it is possible that the user will prioritise the information and therefore ignore some of the data.

If you need to measure more than 6 sets of metrics consider using alerts or alarms which only display data when there is a requirement for the user to see it.

Consider using the dashboard as a communication tool also. Why not use it to post messages to individuals or groups to draw attention to important information but beware of constantly tickering information to the user as eventually they will end up ignoring it.

The key to a successful dashboard deployment is to plan for it like any other software system. Invest time in choosing the right tool, determining metrics, setting targets and then through proper usage of the dashboard ensure those targets are met.

About the Author

Peter Luck is the Senior Services Manager at ROCC Computers with over 12 years experience in the IT industry. He is responsible for all product development and support services to customers using ROCC's Uniclass Social Housing, Waste Management, Highways Management and Management Dashboard software.

ROCC's Uniclass Management Dashboard software is a dynamic web based system providing cross browser and cross platform real time reporting and business intelligence. For more details please see ROCC's Uniclass Management Dashboard.