Performance Dashboards
*Measuring, Monitoring, and Managing Your Business*

Wayne W. Eckerson

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INTRODUCTION

Performance dashboards have gained popularity as a method for busy executives, managers, and employees to easily keep an eye on key business metrics and move quickly through layers of actionable data to obtain the insight they need to resolve issues quickly, efficiently, and effectively. More than just a plain dashboard or scorecard that displays some performance data in a user-friendly fashion, a *performance dashboard* is a full-fledged business information system that is built on a business-intelligence and data-integration infrastructure. Performance dashboards translate an organization’s strategy into objectives, metrics, initiatives, and tasks that are customized to each group and individual in the organization. They help to proactively improve decisions and optimize processes. In *Performance Dashboards*, author Wayne Eckerson demonstrates how organizations can implement performance dashboards to keep employees focused on what is relevant about their organizations and help them optimize performance and accelerate results within their companies.

**PART I: THE LANDSCAPE FOR PERFORMANCE DASHBOARDS**

**Learning About Performance Dashboards**

With multiple business units and various products, strategies, and systems to support them, many organizations quickly lose focus and expend energy and resources on activities that are redundant or even conflicting. Changes in leadership, mergers, and reorganizations amplify this chaos. Organizations cannot rely on the experience or the force of the personality of a strong leader to keep the company focused. Instead, organizations need a performance dashboard that converts the company’s strategy into objectives, metrics, initiatives, and tasks that are customized for...
Performance Dashboards Wayne W. Eckerson

each group and employee in the organization, helping them to focus on the tasks that will achieve the company’s strategies.

A performance dashboard is essentially a performance management system that provides three sets of functions. It allows businesspeople to:

- **Monitor** critical business processes with metrics and trigger alerts when performance does not meet set goals.
- **Analyze** the underlying reasons of problems, using relevant and timely data from various viewpoints and at different levels of detail.
- **Manage** people and processes, helping employees improve decision-making, optimize their performance, and ensure the company moves toward achieving its goals.

During the 1990s, two trends emerged:

1. **Business performance management (BPM)** disciplines, processes, and applications were evolving to help companies optimize the execution of business strategy to manage and achieve performance goals.

2. **Business intelligence (BI)** techniques and tools were developed to turn data into information and turn information into knowledge and plans that could be used to drive effective business activity.

BPM helps organizations focus on the few factors that provide value to the business, instead of the many factors that create work efforts but do not add to the company’s long-term health or viability. BPM forms the bridge between strategy and execution, resulting in improvements in communications, coordination, collaboration, and control of operations. Implementing BPM principles typically involves four steps:

1. **Strategizing** to define the vision, mission, and values of the organization, and setting objectives
2. **Planning** to carry out the strategy and allocating resources
3. **Monitoring** and analyzing performance and taking steps to achieve goals
4. **Acting** to fix problems while adjusting plans to exploit new opportunities

**Key Concepts**

In *Performance Dashboards*, author Wayne Eckerson explains how to best utilize performance dashboards to optimize business results and employee focus.

- Performance dashboards translate an organization’s strategy into objectives, metrics, initiatives, and tasks that are customized to each group and individual in the organization.
- Performance dashboards let executives and managers make fine-tuning decisions about strategy, view the progress of daily operations, and predict future performance.
- A performance dashboard is effective only when a business has clearly defined its mission, values, vision, goals and objectives, metrics and targets, and plans and initiatives.
- Performance dashboards display performance indicators, which are metrics that measure how well business activity is executed by comparing results to a strategic goal.
- Some of the difficult challenges of implementing performance dashboards include ensuring that users adopt them and that the dashboards drive positive change in the organization.

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**Performance Management**

*Finding the Missing Pieces (to Close the Intelligence Gap)*

Gary Cokins
BI features the processes, tools, and technical infrastructure that companies need to measure, monitor, and manage key processes that drive BPM. BI takes data and transforms it into information. Using reporting and analysis tools, users examine the information and convert it into knowledge. Based on the trends they discover in the data, users can create rules to power their operational plans. These plans are executed with actions, and each time an organization cycles through the process, the company gains wisdom about how its business works and what actions achieve the desired effects.

By 2000, these BPM and BI trends converged, creating a high level of interest in performance dashboards. Performance dashboards leverage a company’s BI infrastructure and help it achieve strategy goals defined by the BPM process. They also provide a clear view of the company’s strategies, including what each employee must do daily to achieve the organizational goals. They let executives and managers make fine-tuning decisions about strategy by viewing the progress of daily operations to predict future performance. By publishing performance data throughout a company, performance dashboards encourage different departments to collaborate more closely together, and they improve motivation by creating friendly competition amongst different groups. Using common definitions, rules, and metrics, performance dashboards create a single version of the business information and one reporting system, thus reducing redundancies and costs. Users of performance dashboards will be able to:

- Retrieve business information in the form they prefer, without requiring customized reports from the IT department
- Obtain data in a timely manner
- Take action to resolve an issue
- Assist customers
- Capitalize on a new opportunity, without wasting time searching for data

Effective performance dashboards are built from three applications that provide three levels of information for three types of functions:

### Three applications

A performance dashboard enables users to:

1. **Monitor** performance against corporate strategy metrics, monitor processes that drive daily business, and monitor the progress toward organizational goals.

2. **Analyze** data across dimensions and hierarchies to determine the causes of problems

3. **Manage** collaboration and decision making by keeping up-to-date performance data at the finger tips of managers

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**About the Author**

Wayne W. Eckerson is an industry thought leader and consultant who has covered business intelligence (BI) since 1995. Eckerson has conducted numerous in-depth research studies on BI and is a noted speaker and blogger. He is the author of a popular BI Maturity Model. Recently he was the director of The Data Warehousing Institute (TDWI) Research and chair of TDWI’s BI Executive Summit, which educates business and technical executives about best practices and emerging trends in BI and performance management. He is currently the head of his own consulting company, BI Leader Consulting, which provides advisory services to user and vendor organizations in the areas of data warehousing, business intelligence, performance management, and business analytics.
Three levels

Performance dashboards present data in three levels of detail:

1. The simplest level consists of graphical data with colorful icons that warn users when certain metrics exceed thresholds.
2. The middle layer is dimensional data, which users can navigate by subject or hierarchy, performing what-if analyses or applying complex algorithms.
3. The most detailed layer of data is stored in data warehouses (for example invoices, shipments, or transaction data) and is accessed by users when they need to understand what is causing a problem.

Managing a BI environment in its adolescence is painful. Perhaps the only comforting thought is that most companies are also experiencing the same growing pains. Like your organization, they spend more time reacting to problems than proactively solving them.

Three types

There are three types of performance dashboard, and each emphasizes the three layers and applications to different degrees:

1. Operational dashboards enable front-line workers to view up-to-date information to manage and control operational processes.
2. Tactical dashboards are used to monitor and manage the performance of processes of departments or specific projects.
3. Strategic dashboards help executives monitor the execution of strategic objectives, and help to communicate strategy and review performance.

The critical success factor for any performance dashboard initiative is ensuring a close alignment between business and IT. The deployment project must have the sponsorship and collaboration of users and managers who understand how dashboard metrics can be used to drive positive changes. Businesses that have successfully integrated performance dashboards into their organizations have taken the time to thoroughly understand the major elements of performance management and BI before they launch their performance dashboard implementation project.

Preparing the Organization

A performance dashboard is effective only when a business has clearly defined the major components of its strategy:

- Mission
- Values
- Vision
- Goals and objectives
- Metrics and targets
- Plans and initiatives

Strong, committed sponsorship from senior management is a key factor for the successful implementation of performance dashboards. During the implementation effort, it is critical for senior managers to rally the support of mid-managers. Often it is more beneficial to implement a performance dashboard as a small-scale project and build it over time into an enterprise-wide effort.

Many years of effort are required to build a robust BI infrastructure and develop the internal skills and talent needed to support an effective performance management system. Organizations typically progress through five phases as their BI infrastructure and support systems develop and evolve:

1. Prenatal/infant: This first stage is characterized by the lack of accessible standard performance reports, which are often coded by programmers who cannot keep up with requests for customized reports. This causes users to have difficulty obtaining the information they need. Consequently, users create their own spreadsheets by tapping into databases, spending too much time collecting and formatting data, and creating numerous spreadsheets, which makes it difficult for a company to obtain a consistent view of business activity. To move through this stage, a business must span the Gulf, or the challenges that a company faces when trying to implement a BI solution. To
Performance Dashboards

Wayne W. Eckerson

Performance dashboard projects seem to heighten the tension between the business and the technical sides of an organization to extreme levels. Part of the problem is systemic to IT departments and technical people, but another part involves the willingness of business executives and managers to engage with IT constructively on a long-term basis.

Oftentimes in organizations, business and IT are not aligned. IT groups need to learn the business and talk in business terms, while the business needs to accommodate the technical difficulties of implementing enterprise-wide BI efforts by providing IT with enough time and resources to do the job properly.

Part II: Performance Dashboards in Action

Using Different Types of Dashboards

As previously mentioned, performance dashboards can be classified into three types: operational, tactical, and strategic. Most companies have a combination of all three. Tactical dashboards are more widely used in organizations because they best support departmental initiatives. Strategic dashboards often never

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do this, the project needs suitable sponsorship and funding from senior management. The implementation team must be wary of developing plans that are too aggressive or too large in scale. Prying users from their reliance on spreadsheets is another difficulty that must be overcome.

2. Child: After the prenatal and infant challenges have been met, the business enters the Child stage. In this stage, the main focus is empowering employees with timely information and insight. To do this, departmental managers must fund the development of shared, analytic structures (data marts) that support a single business process or departmental function. They must also purchase BI tools to access and analyze the data in the data marts. BI in the Child stage, however, only serves a small number of power users and is not yet pervasive in the organization.

3. Teenager: As the demand for BI function grows throughout the organization, the number of data marts proliferates, each being maintained separately with separate systems and databases. Eventually, BI projects will need to be consolidated, so the systems must be coordinated using one architecture with divisional databases, supported by teams of BI project managers and experts. In this stage, the BI team first meets the needs of the most demanding users, and then begins to develop performance dashboards to offer actionable information to a larger number of casual users in the company. Unfortunately, many teams never advance beyond this stage, because they enter the Chasm—a series of organizational challenges, such as getting employees to focus on enterprise objectives over departmental ones, overcoming a “silo” mentality among divisions, and achieving agreement on the definition of commonly used terms.

4. Adult: By overcoming the challenges of the Chasm, organizations in this stage can deliver enterprise-wide BI solutions that are governed by a steering committee with representatives from all departments, not just the BI team. This is the most beneficial time for best practices to be documented since the BI effort in the organization has a more mature understanding of how to market itself and educate the rest of the organization about using the BI tools. Adult-stage organizations have complete sets of operational, tactical, and strategic dashboards at each level and are driven by sophisticated analytics.
progress beyond Excel documents or PowerPoint presentations to a more robust data infrastructure that is needed to deliver timely, integrated data with little manual effort. Executives and upper management usually prefer to utilize strategic dashboards. Mid-level managers mostly use tactical dashboards to monitor departmental efforts. They also refer to strategic and operational dashboards when communicating up or down the organizational hierarchy. Workers mostly use operational dashboards to monitor key processes and tactical dashboards to check on departmental data.

The temptation with performance dashboards is to focus too much on measures and results and not enough on process and strategy. When this happens, executives fail to see the forest for the trees. They are so focused on measures that they fail to see the bigger picture of what is going on and what they need to do to move the organization in the right direction.

On average, all three types of dashboards display about a dozen top-level metrics, but most users refer to tactical and operational dashboards. Dashboards can be built from scratch, bought outright from a vendor, or developed as an improvement or customization of a vendor product.

Two subtypes of operational dashboards are used by operations workers:
1. **Detect-and-respond dashboards** are used to monitor an activity, to optimize a process, or to avert problems.
2. **Incent-and-motivate dashboards** increase productivity by displaying individual team performance against established goals.

Both subtypes of operational dashboards are action-oriented and rely heavily on alerts to notice users about exception conditions when they occur. These dashboards provide near-real-time data and are refreshed frequently.

Tactical dashboards are mostly used to optimize business processes at a departmental level and to analyze performance against goals. There are three subtypes:
1. **Enterprise dashboards** show the performance of all business units.
2. **Mashboards** are personal or workgroup dashboards that serve as a container for charts and tables extracted from existing reports and Web pages.
3. **Analytical dashboards** help business analysts explore data sets for trends and anomalies. The data in a tactical dashboard is usually obtained from an enterprise data warehouse and is refreshed daily or weekly.

Strategic dashboards, sometimes called scorecards, help executives manage the execution of strategy on an enterprise-wide scale. They contain summaries of data and are updated monthly or quarterly. There are two types of strategic dashboards:
1. **Balanced scorecards** help organizations define a balanced set of measures across four perspectives (financial, customer, internal, and learning/growth) so they can better focus on efforts to ensure long-term growth.
2. **Management scorecards** simply measure the organization’s progress to achieve strategic goals.

**Dashboards in Action**

In reality, many dashboards do not cleanly fit into these aligned categories. However, various companies have successfully deployed performance dashboards to improve operational, tactical, and strategic activities within their organizations. For example, the Police Department of the City of Richmond, Virginia implemented an operational dashboard that uses analytical models to predict crime throughout the city in eight hour cycles. The models are fed with real-time data about crime and weather, helping to position patrol personnel in the right places at the right time to deter crime.

Other organizations have effectively used tactical dashboards. For example, Rohm and Haas, a division of Dow Chemical, built their tactical dashboard from the ground up, beginning with establishing an enterprise view to help executives examine the performance of each of the company’s major oper-
ating groups using only a dozen or so key metrics. The company now uses 40 similar dashboards for its entire operation, pulling data from a center enterprise data warehouse.

Finally, many other organizations have been successful in deploying strategic dashboards, or scorecards. For example, the Ministry of Works in the Kingdom of Bahrain used the balanced scorecard methodology to develop 17 distinct strategic dashboards that reflect 200 objectives and 500 metrics. The Ministry dedicated resources to a strategic management office to coordinate the development and deployment of the strategic dashboards. After some effort to convince administrators that the dashboards would help secure additional resources to achieve strategic goals rather than being tools for punishing poor performance, the Ministry has achieved significant success.

PART III: CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS: TIPS FROM THE TRENCHES

Developing and Managing a Dashboard Project

When a senior executive has a vision for a metrics-oriented organization and wants to initiate performance dashboards, he or she usually can steer the organization easily in that direction. It is more difficult for mid-level managers or IT managers to convince upper management to implement such a program, obtain sponsorship and resources, and overcome cultural resistance to change.

The first step is to find a business sponsor—an executive who is committed to and energized by the idea of using performance dashboards. Often these types of executives are new to the company and have experience leveraging information technology systems to achieve results. Other executives who make good sponsors are those who feel that they are not receiving enough data to make decisions, or those who are overwhelmed by a surplus of data, but are lacking quality information. Sometimes executives are skeptical about the benefits of performance dashboards and require a lot more information, such as a strong cost-benefit analysis, a prototype dashboard, or even benchmarking against competitors that have already implemented dashboards. Waiting for the right catalyst to change executive mindsets, such as a merger, acquisition, or economic downturn, sometimes is the only way to gain executive commitment.

Once you have gathered all the information requirements and defined the metrics and targets, you are ready to design the look and feel of the performance dashboard. The best way to get the process going is to create a prototype that you’ve developed in conjunction with a visual designer or based on knowledge you’ve gained from reading selected books.

After gaining the sponsorship of an executive, the next step is to sell the project to mid-level managers. These managers control departmental budgets and can influence how other staff members buy into a project; however, these managers may feel threatened by performance dashboards that would display to the entire organization how their teams are performing. An executive mandate to implement the system is not enough of an incentive for these managers; they must also understand that performance dashboards can improve departmental efficiency, free up staff time, and lower costs.

The main job of the sponsor is to secure funding within the organization. Nevertheless, instituting a large team with giant budgets often sets high expectations that are challenging to meet. Instead, many organizations have successfully deployed performance dashboards on a shoe-string budget, bootstrapping the project with small, highly motivated teams of business and technical people.

The type of dashboard being implemented often dictates how the deployment project will be managed. Operational dashboards are typically managed at a departmental or operational level. Tactical dashboards are usually managed in the IT department since they have an enterprise-wide scope and serve multiple departments. Strategic dashboards are commonly started at the executive level to avoid letting any one particular department dominate the metrics in the dashboard.

The implementation team needs a champion or
business driver, usually a senior executive with a strong knowledge of the business, understanding of performance management concepts, excellent communication skills, and technical knowledge of the business data. In order to build successful solutions, the champion needs to explain the business requirements in terms that the technical people will understand. Next, the champion must gather members of a steering committee to oversee the project. The members should represent each business group or unit within the company. The steering committee works with a team whose members specifically focus on defining key performance indicators and accompanying metrics. Then, a technical team translates the metrics into a working dashboard application, managing the project with standard technical project management methods. After the dashboards have been developed and tested, to ensure their success the project teams need to market the project to the rest of the organization, monitor how the dashboards are being used, periodically revise the key performance indicators, maintain the system, and train and coach departmental managers.

Businesspeople use the term ‘real time’ to mean something that happens quickly. But how fast is real time to them? Is it a second? A minute? An hour? Perhaps a better term to describe the timely delivery of information to decision makers is ‘right time.’

Performance metrics are powerful agents of change within an organization. Metrics are measures of business activity; however, performance dashboards display performance indicators, which are specific metrics that measure how well business activity is executed by comparing results to a strategic goal. Organizations must understand the components of metrics in order to make them effective. Metrics can also be developed for various types of activity. Output metrics measure the results of a business activity that happened in the past. Driver metrics track current activity so adjustments can be made in order to meet or exceed goals for a period. Other types of metrics include activity metrics that are connected to particular goals, risk indicators that measure the risk of business activity or how actions will affect operations, and key performance indicators that have profound effects on the business and trigger process improvement throughout the organization.

A well-defined performance indicator has six attributes:

1. It contains an actual value of performance measurement
2. It is measured within a specific time frame
3. It is compared to a base line or benchmark value
4. It is associated with a planned target
5. Its planned target is divided into ranges of performances
6. It is encoded in a dashboard with visual graphics that allow the viewer to quickly grasp how current performance sizes up with the targets

Having too many metrics to track can blur the message for employees. Over time, metrics lose their impact and should be replaced with others. Several metrics are needed to ensure a proper balance of activities, and they must be aligned. An effective performance metric:

- Embodies a strategic objective
- Is simple to understand
- Has an owner who is accountable for its outcome
- Is actionable, so users know how to take corrective actions
- Requires timely data that is updated frequently
- Is referenceable, so users can have the option to view its data origins and metadata
- Reflects accurate data
- Is correlated to ensure it drives desired results
- Is game-proof to ensure employees cannot circumvent or improperly influence the results
- Is aligned with corporate objectives
- Uses standardized definitions of terms
- Is relevant, and is refreshed, revised, or discarded over time

When designing effective metrics, organizations should gather requirements and strategic objectives,
compare them to existing metrics, and define any missing metrics. After being prioritized and reduced to a manageable number, the metrics should be reviewed by those individuals whose performance is measured by the metrics. This validation process brings out specific nuances that need to be included when the metrics are used in the performance dashboards. Then, realistic targets need to be set to achieve buy-in from these individuals.

Too often, the visual design of a dashboard obscures its effectiveness to communicate the meaning of the data. Good dashboard design leverages expertise about how users perceive information and process data, and employs other visual techniques to effectively group, order, and highlight data. Good visual design uses the right graphs and charts to monitor performance and examine relationships in the data. Dashboard designers test and validate their designs using usability labs and feedback about prototypes.

Organizations can implement several ways to architect a performance dashboard. Each method has trade-offs and many businesses will select several approaches to support the development of their performance dashboards. The selection of the right architecture is dependent on the user requirements, the complexity of the chosen metrics, and the various applications that the performance dashboard will have to support. As the environment becomes more complex, it is more likely that the organization will need data structures and models that have been predefined using BI tools and data warehousing techniques. Less complex environments can use less robust and less costly methods.

Deploying and Integrating Dashboards

Deploying and integrating dashboards within an organization are processes that do not follow any particular prescribed methods. Organizations have been successful deploying them using a centralized or distributed process, starting at the top of the organization and working down, or from the bottom and working up. Most companies use a mix of methods, finding the right approach that works best for them.

The most common approach is to form a corporate development team to build an executive dashboard that shows or links to departmental dashboards. This approach requires the organization to deploy a business and systems architecture so that all dashboards share commonly defined metrics, dimensions, and attributes and run on an integrated BI platform using a shared data warehouse. However, centralized, top-down deployment attempts usually run into problems, such as being overwhelmed by the scale and scope of the project, and the political issues it generates. Meanwhile, business units get impatient for actionable data and start building their own independent dashboards. On the other hand, distributed approaches in which each group creates its own dashboards undermine the organization’s ability to maintain consistency in the definition and use of its data. Without an agreement beforehand about metrics and development standards, the individually developed dashboards are difficult to integrate later on.

Although performance dashboards can store large volumes of data, this is not a prerequisite for success, especially with strategic dashboards. In fact, some successful strategic dashboards contain only a few gigabytes of data, less than you can store on a single thumb drive. For strategic dashboards, the quality of information is the key, not the quantity.

Some of the difficult challenges of implementing performance dashboards include ensuring that users adopt them and that the dashboards drive positive change in the organization. If employees do not use them, the dashboards will have no impact at all. Dashboards must become an integral part of how people do their jobs. Organizations are more successful at ensuring end-user adoption if they recruit the right business sponsors, who must provide the organization with proper visual and verbal cues at the beginning of the project, indicating that the project is worth the time and effort to learn and use. Sponsors can also recruit lower level managers to take ownership of key responsibilities while key metrics and data elements are being defined, updated, and certified. Users are more likely to adopt performance dashboards when they can trust the data. By reconciling
data in the new system with what existed in the past, project team members can foster trust among dashboard users. Successful deployment of dashboards involves providing flexible training for users, tracking how dashboards are used, and gather feedback about user satisfaction.

A performance dashboard helps a business achieve its strategic objectives. In order to do so, it must motivate individuals and groups to work on those tasks that will move the organization down the right path. Each metric must be continually examined to determine if it is having the intended effect on the performance of its target audience. A key to the success of the deployment and integration of a performance dashboard initiative is ensuring that managers and staff are properly trained. Managers in particular need training on how to use performance dashboards to empower employees, not punish them. Incentives can be attached to the performance results shown by performance dashboards. By publicizing performance results of each team, workers can compare their results with those of their co-workers. Bonus pay can also be attached to the results from performance dashboards; however, executives should ensure the metrics are stable, reliable, and tamper-proof before aligning pay with performance results.

FEATURES OF THE BOOK

Reading Time: 5.5 hours, 330 pages

Performance Dashboards by Wayne W. Eckerson explains how organizations can utilize performance dashboards to keep employees informed and focused on completing relevant and beneficial work tasks. The book contains tips, techniques, and practical insights from a recognized expert and consultant in the field of business intelligence. Readers can follow a strategic road map in the book to help their organizations get started with performance management initiatives by using performance dashboard technology. This second edition reflects the latest advances in the field, including new case studies, a discussion of how to create scalable dashboards, explanations of next-generation capabilities, best practices for managing dashboard projects, new guidelines for developing performance dashboard displays, an in-depth examination of the role of performance dashboards in the BI Maturity Model, and more. The book is written for business and IT managers who oversee performance management projects or who intend to overhaul their company’s performance management system, but it is also accessible for all business executives. The book is written so a busy executive can skim the text for solutions and key takeaways and return later to the text for more detail. An extensive index is included, making this book incredibly useful as a reference book.

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