



# The psychology of executive dashboards

“Executive dashboards” are popping up everywhere. Johna Till Johnson, writing in *Networkworld.com*, calls them “technology’s next wave.” And with good reason. A quick Google search produces dozens of websites with solutions that claim to quickly synthesize and present essential business data to busy executives.

So what is an executive dashboard? Simply put, it’s a graphical display that reduces business data to a few relevant metrics, and then presents them in a pleasing and easy-to-understand format. A dashboard format often includes dials, gauges, charts and thermometers. As Elazar Harel, from the University of California San Diego, and Toby Sitko, of the EDU-CAUSE Center for Applied Research explain, “Dashboards allow you to

focus on business priorities by filtering out irrelevant information.”

How about an example? Figure 1 shows one of several gauges used in a monthly progress report for a system of nineteen campuses who are simultaneously implementing ERP solutions. At a glance the busy executive knows all she/he may want to know—especially since the needle is in the green, which means the project expenditures are going according to plan.

Dashboards can be very beneficial to higher ed executives. They support strategic thinking, and they promote better decision making. The psychological literature tells us that metrics feedback can dramatically change the

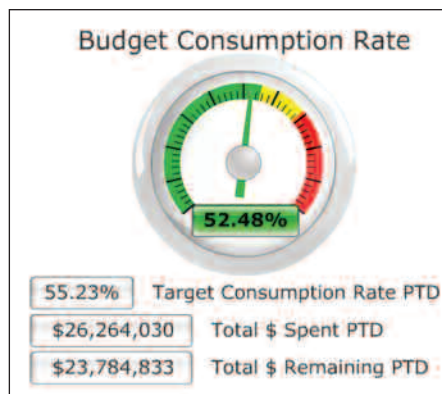


Figure 1

behavior of people. The sooner the feedback occurs after the behavior, the quicker and more dramatic the changed behavior can be. So, real-time dashboard data can have a marvelous effect.

## A university example

ERP projects abound with examples. They are mission-critical, multi-year, multi-million dollar software implementations that consume enormous resources campus-wide. A daunting ERP project staffing challenge is the day job/night job conundrum. Often the same people who must deliver critical day-to-day service are also assigned to work on the ERP project. When priorities conflict the day job responsibilities usually appear most urgent. Project tasks are put off. After all, project milestone dates always seem so far away on the calendar.

This problem was recently faced by a university in the northeastern United States. The solution involved a weekly dashboard metric in which all the project teams (recruitment, admissions, registrar, financial aid and student accounts) could instantly see how well they were accomplishing scheduled project tasks. Figure 2 is a glimpse of the combined progress of all these teams over a nineteen week interval.

The particular metric tracked here is the percentage of tasks that were actually begun compared to the number of tasks that were supposed to have begun. The behavior of the project teams dramatically improved after this dashboard and its feedback system went into effect.

When the first dashboard reports came out, all project teams were in the “red” (danger). Over time the color changed to “yellow” (warning). For the last ten weeks, the reports were in the “green” (on schedule). A significant behavior change was stimulated.

In this and many other examples, the psychology of group feedback – often accompanied by friendly competition among project teams – produced a beneficial result. And with dashboards the story unfolds in an executive-friendly manner. ■

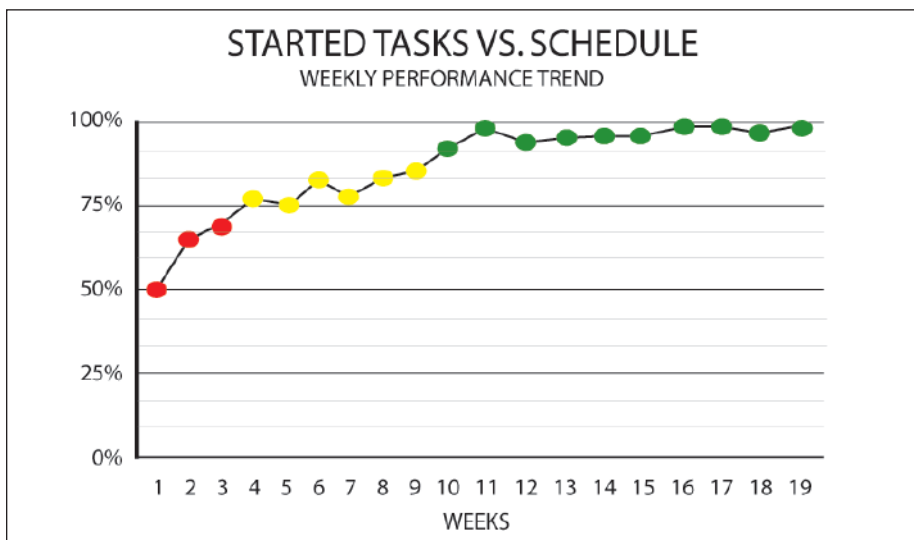


Figure 2



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