AVS *Advanced Visual Systems*

C-Suite Analytics: More Insight, Less Detail

Dashboards fuel business intelligence bloat and get in the way of executive insight. What's the cure for the CEO that wants answers "now," the CFO that wants something affordable and the CIO that's caught in-between the two?

Advanced Visual Systems (Boston/London) is a leader in data visualization software and solutions that have helped over 2,000 clients in every industrial sector improve the quality of key decisions through computer graphics and advanced analytics.

The Dashboard Dilemma

As performance dashboards became easier to develop and less expensive to deploy they became a popular method of information sharing in every industry sector. Many financial and IT execs saw the dashboard as an elegant and efficient replacement for the "daily/weekly/monthly spreadsheet" that for decades had served as a reliable, inexpensive and portable management reporting tool.

But report users (and authors) quickly realized that the design flexibility and number-crunching capability of Excel was not easily replicated in the dashboard environment and that the high-level aggregation of dashboard data often forced too much information into many slow-loading screens. As a result, non-expert dashboard users became easily lost in the data or—more importantly—failed to garner any insight at all.

Top executives have traditionally relied on highly screened and carefully analyzed data to guide them in key decisions and day-to-day management. Off-the-shelf dashboards lack a "smart layer" of data preparation and computational capability to provide these essential requirements and consequently have been unsuccessful in the C-suite and are quickly evolving into a line-of-business resource instead of the executive tool they were frequently envisioned as.

It's ironic that at a time when data is "Big" and plentiful, social media is influencing huge strategic initiatives and more tablets than laptops can be seen in use at airline club lounges, that most executives are relying on a manually-prepared spreadsheet or are completely in the dark about what happened yesterday at their company—and what's likely to happen tomorrow.

AVS has been charged with solving this dashboard dilemma for several high-profile companies in the fields of consumer products, advertising and financial services. Our conclusions suggest that the answer to next-generation executive insight lies in the ability to:

- Extract data from existing internal systems and a fast-growing universe of high-quality external resources;

- Validate, integrate and analyze the data using advanced analytics;

- Utilize creative and highly-annotated computer graphics to intuitively reveal trends, correlations and business impact that is elusive in dashboards that are unsophisticated in their graphics capability; and

- Publish the results in secure, easy-to-use snapshots that are identical on both the desktop and the mobile tablet.

CRM meets ERP meets the Street

The leading areas that many executives and senior managers claim to be completely in the dark are:

- What risk, economic and competitive trends are likely to impact performance?

- Which marketing and promotional activities directly contribute to revenue?

- How are products, brands and corporate strategies perceived by markets and consumers?

Understanding these strategic metrics typically involves querying no less than a half-dozen disconnected data sources, trusting a team of analysts to do the math accurately, and waiting sometimes weeks for the results—by which time the data is stale and the ability to act at the *speed of business* is significantly diminished.

By creating a private Cloud to collect, calculate and publish these and other executive metrics, visionary companies are delivering real-time *answers* to senior management using the same data consumed by the detail-rich accounting, inventory and business intelligence systems that executives don't have the training or time to use.

Answers are what executives want and answers are being delivered in powerful new approaches to executive insight using data visualization, a graphics process that accelerates comprehension and ease-of-use.

Business users have long enjoyed the benefits of charts and graphs that have become ubiquitous in CRM, BI and other operational applications but the executive user typically finds the simplicity and over-aggregation of these charts uninformative. Properly designed data visualizations wildly transcend the "summary chart" of a dashboard and add trend lines, highlights, narrative and insight that the executive has come to trust and respect in slide decks and detailed analyst reports.

What an executive doesn't want

For years, top managers have demonstrated a disdain for logging into business intelligence systems, learning how to use them and being faced with too many options with too few insights.

Dashboards don't deliver answers in their output—they deliver simplistic *mini-reports* that are highly aggregated and require the user to drill into layers of data. Few executives have the time or interest to take deep dives into row/column detail; they

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expect that effort to be done for them. Executives don't want to wait in line, wait on hold or wait for a screen to keep loading. So creating an executive-class information system requires speed, agility and creativity.

Where the rubber meets the road

Next-wave executive insight systems are characterized by a fusion of speed, flexibility and ease of use. Without these three elements almost any approach will fail because executives just won't use the system, as is the case with many dashboard implementations.

Dashboard vendors are primarily focused on serving large user populations and offer generic approaches that simplify dashboard design and management. A majority of vendors lack the ability to insert an algorithm, model or process between the raw data and the end user and therefore are predestined to be robotic reporting tools that cannot support the needs of the modern executive.

Successful executive insight is highly dependent on being able to address the complexities of a fast-moving corporation and tell the story in a clear and concise style. Dynamic data visualization (interactive graphics updated from streaming data and on-the-fly analytics) empowers executive insight by replicating the enlightening executive graphics that slide decks and analyst reports convey—only with automatic updating and easy publication to any computer or mobile device.

Design to executive specs

The most effective way to consider how an executive insight system might help your team capitalize on the expensive data that already exists within the organization is to (a) forget about every possible artistic or analytic limitation that exists in your current technology stack and (b) sketch out what an executive view of the business should look like.

The limitations of dashboard and business intelligence systems should not impose a limitation on how data and insight flows to corporate leadership. Executive systems must quickly and accurately provide top management with on-demand "views" that speak to their specific needs—not to those of line of business or operational managers. Effective, well-designed data visualization is a key component of executive insight and innovative market leaders are quickly realizing its power and potential.

Keys to effective executive insight systems:

- *Make it fast;*
- *Calculate answers;*
- *Eliminate drill downs;*
- *Use carefully designed data visualizations; and*
- *Notify users of changes as they happen*

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