• ADVICE+DISSENT: Managing Technology Data Dump

By Karen D. Schwartz | letters@govexec.com | *Government Executive* | October 15, 2005

Executive dashboards help agency decision-makers turn information into insight.

The Environmental Protection Agency uses one to analyze key financial and environmental indicators. The Defense Department's TRICARE health care system evaluates the effectiveness of various treatments and programs with one. The Army Reserve Command uses one to monitor, analyze and report on operational readiness of troops. And the list goes on. Countless federal organizations have learned the hard way that collecting data is only the first step toward understanding it. To recognize, analyze and rectify problems quickly, many are turning to executive dashboards - automated panels containing the latest possible data, with performance measures and gauges that indicate the status of those measures. Often, managers can drill down from those measures to receive the detailed information they need to make decisions or determine the root of the problem.

Agencies are using dashboards in a variety of ways - from budget performance integration and financial management to case management reporting and performance, and from acquisition technology and logistics to human capital performance management.

Executive dashboards solve many problems for organizations - chiefly, how to handle the vast amounts of fast-changing data they receive and how to use that data. "Managers have told us over and over again that they are getting inundated with spreadsheets and database reports," says David Vandagriff, vice president of business development at Corda Technologies Inc. in Lindon, Utah. "The dashboard pulls the information out at a high level and lets a manager understand at a glance whether things are going well and where there are problems."

It's also an effective way to comply with the financial and performance requirements of the President's Management Agenda and the 1993 Government Performance and Results Act, which are intended to improve the way agencies run their programs. "We've seen them improve management of program and budget performance by linking strategy and metrics to goals and decisions, and becoming more outcome- and results-oriented," says Scott Dulman, worldwide director of government marketing for Business Objects of San Jose, Calif.

Other benefits include better allocation of resources, and alignment of spending with an organization's strategic priorities. Managers also report significant time savings when program managers no longer have to collect and update their own data.

The State Department's Office of Strategic and Performance Planning is a recent convert. It is transitioning to the Global Affairs Dashboard from Oracle and Business Objects to manage volumes of performance plan data from missions and bureaus worldwide.

"We were capturing a lot of data, but it was sitting in a database into which we didn't have a lot of visibility beyond reports," says Rudolph C. Lohmeyer III, a senior policy analyst in the office. "We didn't have the ability to juxtapose, for example, the performance, planning, goals, resources and staffing levels across missions and bureaus to do real analysis and comparisons and make better decisions."

Once the Global Affairs Dashboard is fully up and running, senior decision-makers, high-level managers in missions and bureaus, planning coordinators and program managers will use it to analyze allocated resources and mission performance against specific strategic goals by bureau and request ad hoc reports.

UPPING THE ANTE

Now that so many federal agencies - and increasingly, state and local governments as well - are realizing the benefits of executive dashboards, they want to up the ante with more scalability, ease of use and, most important, intelligence. Vendors have stepped up to the plate, offering upgrades that do just that.

"Everyone now wants the ability to have the information be data-driven and not simply a reporting tool," says Brian Rowland, performance management strategist with the U.S. government and education division of Cary, N.C.-based SAS Institute. "A dashboard can tell you where your performance measures stand right now, but that only tells you so much. If you're in the red, the executive wants to know why. Business analytics and intelligence capabilities can help answer the question why by delivering reports, graphs and data to support answering those questions."

The Coast Guard is a case in point, having implemented an automated dashboard from SAS

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