Data watch

More and more rental companies are using dashboards to present key business information in a way that is easy to digest and which prompts action. Murray Pollok **reports.**

The modern day rental software system generates lots of data, which is both a good and bad thing: data tell you what's going on, but too much of it will leave you swamped and struggling to identify what's really important.

That's where business intelligence tools and dashboards come in, presenting information in an easy to digest and prioritised way, communicating information to managers quickly and efficiently.

Jack Shea, general manager at Solutions by Computer (SBC), says data overload is a chronic problem in many businesses; "Reports tend to be especially time-consuming – the rental operator usually has to wade through a lot of data to draw useful conclusions. Dashboards get you to the finish line faster; they are usually a graphical, summary presentation of the underlying data.

"It's important to point out that the use of dashboards can be operational, tactical or strategic. Strategic applications are often trend-related: the data is presented in a way that helps the rental owner/manager correct negative trends or capitalise on positive trends."

Olly Williamson, senior business development manager at InspHire, says dashboards can be used operationally to track equipment, to find information such as purchase orders and rental contracts, and to provide a barometer for business performance.

"Utilising business intelligence dashboards should save you time and give you easy access to your business KPIs", says Mr Williamson, "Therefore it's important to identify the key metrics that you operate your business by, such as rental contracts generated each day, average rental contract rate, average utilisation, and then have a dashboard for each of these. Dashboards are there to show you where the issues are, rather than you having to delve into reporting to find the issues."

Of course the 'issues' vary depending on the manager's role, which is why dashboards are often best tailored to a particular job function. Lauren Dorman vice president of product development at RMI Corp, says; "when you approach your design and layout from this perspective, you can easily see your way through to developing the key factors that allow your staff to be successful."

The dashboards use underlying data generated by the company's operating software, which means that there is an enormous array of numbers to choose from.

Nick Thomson, sales director at MCS Global in the UK, says there are typically four main areas where dashboards find themselves used: to analyse customers (revenue analysis), equipment (revenues and utilisation by product), costs (including workshop activities) and purchasing (such as re-rental levels, consumables and fleet capital expenditure).

Sample dashboards

A list of some of the key data commonly reported in dashboards – as provided by a number of software specialists - is given in the box below left.

Software companies including RMI, Solutions by Computer, Wynne Systems, Sycor, inspHire, Result Group, Ramco Systems, MCS and Infor are among those offering dashboards, most commonly as a standard feature within their software packages – and frequently offering dozens or even hundreds of 'out of the box' reports – and with the capability to create additional, non-standard reports.

Indian company Ramco Systems, which provides a Cloud-based rental ERP solution, provides both pre-built and user configurable dashboards. These dashboards fall into three distinct types: role-based, transaction-specific and dashboards for

Dashboard data?

Wynne Systems
"The majority of our customers want to better manage cash flow through management of accounts receivable and accounts payable. Similarly, revenue trends broken down by category and class allow fleet managers to better allocate their fleet budget to equipment that will deliver a consistent return on investment."

Ramco Systems
"Analysis through Multi-dimensional reports: Opportunity & sales analysis, equipment availability & utilization analysis, financial performance analysis, asset lifecycle analysis, headcount analysis, fuel spend & consumption analysis, equipment tracking & activity analysis
Key Performance Indicators: physical or dollar utilization, invoicing inaccuracies , % rental yield, average fleet age, fuel spend as % of revenue, operator costs as % of revenue, order conversion rate."

Solutions by Computer
"Management dashboards can illustrate measures like total revenue and/or rental revenue versus budget, versus previous period. They also track daily business volume. Operational dashboards help to manage rental activities such as reservations, deliveries awaiting dispatch, and inventory utilisation.

Information about average days to collect receivables is useful to financial people; the value of inventory in maintenance status, weighted for time, is valuable to maintenance managers. The value of reservations written, compared to the same period last year or to budgeted numbers."

Sycor
"Customers are increasingly interested in seeing traditional financial data, often combined with business data from the rental sector. For rental companies: time utilisation, financial utilisation, fleet age and rental forecast. Analysis of fleet utilisation, business activities and sales – and the relationship between them – is important."

Infor
"**Profit/loss:** ROI, rental revenue, rental cost, profit.
Fleet: time utilisation, financial utilisation, fleet age, fleet distribution, fleet cost (maintenance, depreciation)
Rental operation: lost rent, invoice accuracy, re-rent (cost, revenue), forecast/accrued revenue."

Some of the dashboards offered by inspHire.

your turn to 'play the game', the App icon displays a value or a count of new items. I like this analogy because it generally causes the user to want to take immediate action to bring that count of tasks due to zero. That's the goal of the Role Center – to alert the user to take action on the workload that is slated for today".

Standard offering

The benefits of having a software solution linked to a major ERP system with many standard dashboards is highlighted by Frank Jakobi, vice president at Sycor in Germany. The SycorRental solution is fully integrated with Microsoft Dynamics AX, Microsoft's ERP solution.

maintenance planning, scheduling and dispatching.

Rajeev Singh, practice head at Ramco, says role-based dashboards are pre-configured specific to the roles such as CEO, CFO and Depot Manager, containing KPIs, key analytical reports, alerts and trends. The transaction based dashboards are specific to functions like rental operations, equipment maintenance or cost management.

Ms Dorman at RMI says its ADVANTAGE solution distinguishes between KPI dashboards and Role Centers. "KPI Dashboards are focused on the critical success factors for the business. These high level views are monitored by management to watch for both positive and negative trends as they develop. Many of our clients view Dashboards either on demand during the day or on schedule, delivered to their email on a frequency that works for them. We have another contingent of clients who display the less financially sensitive dashboards on large monitors throughout the organisation."

On the other hand, the Role Centers are based on the job responsibility of the individual and are designed to keep them focused on their tasks. RMI offers reports for more than 20 different job responsibilities.

"When I describe Role Centers, I often liken it...to that of an App running on your SmartPhone. When you have a new message, an update to install or it's