

EXPERT OPINION

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INTERACTIVE MANAGEMENT DASHBOARDS »»

Many businesses struggle to monitor and measure their performance against set strategic targets. Hampered by practices that frequently rely on the manipulation of data outside the corporate business intelligence system, the results are often restricted to static information with no ability to perform further 'what-if' analysis. How much more effective would it be to display your business data in a visually rich, intuitive and interactive format, providing meaningful support for the decision-making process?

Well, that's just what you get with SAP's latest offering: Xcelsius Enterprise 2008 – a combination of Microsoft Excel (as a data modelling tool) and Macromedia Flash Player (as the rendering engine) that allows you to create easy-to-interpret visual representations of your business data and use them to model different scenarios.

One of the most noticeable features of the Xcelsius dashboards is how easy it is to incorporate company styles and logos into pixel-perfect layouts without the need for programming. Analytical functions can also be built in to the Dashboard, making it simple and easy for users to view and interpret even quite complex information.

Xcelsius is primarily a visualisation tool, not a back-end reporting channel or data management package. Even so, data connectivity options allow you to see real-time business data alongside static data such as sales targets entered within Xcelsius.

Visualise your business data
in a rich, intuitive format with the
ability to perform 'What-if' analysis

Build dashboard prototypes in hours, not days

Xcelsius provides an easy-to-use WYSIWYG interface to quickly develop interactive and powerful dashboards that can be embedded in Microsoft Office tools, Adobe documents or your corporate portal.

Prior to the acquisition of Business Objects, SAP had dashboard offerings such as Strategic Enterprise Management (SEM) and Web Application Designer (WAD). These applications were functionally rich but required large initial investments and significant IT resource to cater for changing requirements. The acquisition of Business Objects brought further dashboard software options into the SAP portfolio. SAP was quick to make a decision on which dashboard tool to develop for the future. SEM was already in maintenance mode with no further development planned and it was also decided to put the WAD into maintenance with no further investment in development. Xcelsius was selected as the best option for ongoing development.

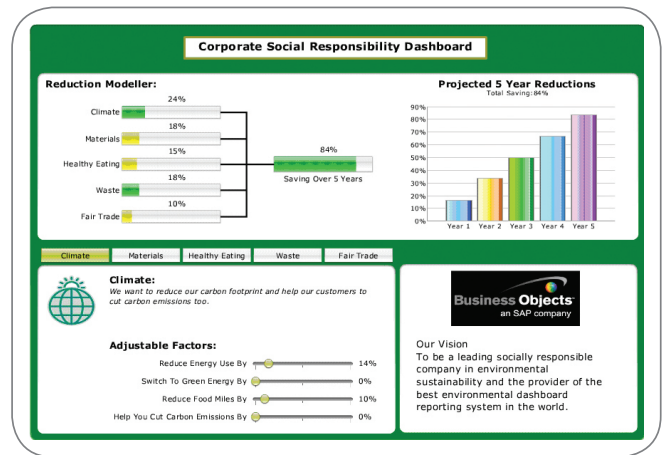
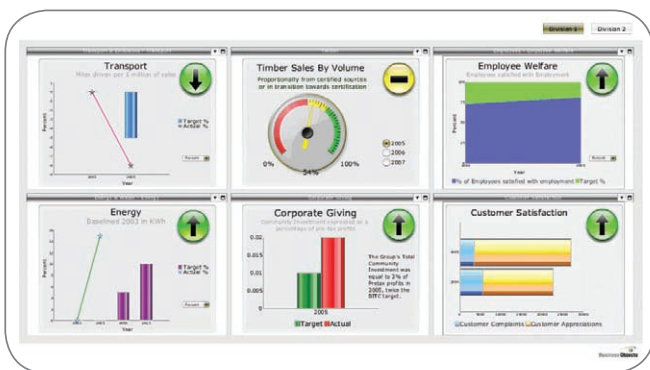
Xcelsius in its current form offers an impressive feature set and, with SAP focusing long-term investment, this functionality is set to improve further. With the release of Xcelsius+ next year, users can expect seamless integration capabilities across the SAP suite of products.

Ease of use

Even first-time users will find it easy to create impressive-looking dashboards quickly. With just a sketch of the dashboard and some sample data in Microsoft Excel, it is possible to build a prototype in hours. The software has Microsoft Excel embedded into it to allow you to model your data into the dashboard components using a WYSIWYG user interface. It is intuitive and enables a mock-up of the dashboards to be quickly prepared and presented to the end users. This allows validation of the solution at a very early stage.

Connectivity

Connectivity to real-time data is very easy. The incoming data is married to the Excel range that your dashboard components are linked to. Data needs to be provided to the dashboard in a summarised form. This means it is necessary to design queries or reports in the source applications, such as SAP Business Warehouse, at the summarised level. Data connection possibilities include Crystal Reports, Live Office, Query as a web service and XML.



Dashboard presentation

The dashboard can be published in a variety of formats. It can be exported to Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word, Adobe PDF, Macromedia Flash and HTML. Once exported, the data connections remain live. For example, you can have a management board pack in PowerPoint that refreshes the data automatically each month. When exported to the third-party applications the dashboard also remains interactive. The user can make use of tabs, filters, 'what-if' dials and other functions to query and visualise the data. All this gives significant flexibility and usability when deploying a dashboard to the end user.

Xcelsius in action

Atos Origin, in conjunction with SAP, has developed a unique online survey focusing on reporting Corporate Social Responsibility Key Performance Indicators - www.controlyourcarbon.com. The website contains some example dashboards with interactive functions that demonstrate how Xcelsius can be deployed and is certainly worth exploring further.

Final thoughts

SAP has chosen Xcelsius as its key tool for dashboards and it's easy to see why. The tool is flexible, easy to deploy and easy to maintain. Users can visualise and interact with business data in a variety of commonly used desktop mediums as well as a corporate portal. Xcelsius is a powerful tool and forms a valuable addition to SAP's business application suite.

Next steps

Atos Origin has a team of SAP and Business Objects consultants who can advise you on the best business intelligence strategy for your organisation. For more information, please email uk_sap_practice@atosorigin.com or visit www.atosorigin.co.uk