Chapter 10: Designing Effective Security Dashboards

Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Airman's Odyssey

Just when you thought it was safe to leave the comfort of your analytics lab to grab another caffeinated beverage you find yourself in a conversation with one of the security managers and are asked the nigh inevitable and dreaded question: “Can you help us build a ‘security’ dashboard?” If that sentence did not cause even a flicker of your own fight-or-flight response, you may not truly understand the difficulty and complexity of designing succinct, meaningful displays of quantitative information in order to drive some type of action. This chapter will present techniques and advice that will enable you to design dashboards to help measure, monitor and mobilize every layer of security in your organization.

What Is A Dashboard, Anyway?

Is nigh impossible to discuss the subject of dashboards without quoting the definition of “dashboard” coined by the “Godfather” of dashboards, Stephen Few:

“A dashboard is a **visual display** of the **most important information** needed to **achieve one or more objectives** that has been **consolidated in a single computer screen [or printed page]** so it can be **monitored at a glance**.”

—Stephen Few, Information Dashboard Design

(We’ve added “*or printed page*” since organizations are still quite fond of paper and there are special design considerations when planning for printed output.)

We can make Few’s definition a bit more real by phrasing it another way: a dashboard provides a single screen/page opportunity to provide the most critical information, in the most concise and effective ways possible to enable the consumer to quickly understand the elements being described and, if necessary, make the most appropriate decision(s). If you present data that is irrelevant, your dashboard will not be used. If you have too many or too complex encodings, your dashboard will be ignored. If it’s…ugly…well, at least you won’t be asked to make dashboards anymore! Dashboard creation truly is a daunting endeavor. Too fully grasp the nuances of what a dashboard is we’ll start by chipping away at the marble block of what a dashboard **is not** to reveal the underlying true nature.

A Dashboard Is Not An Automobile

The term *dashboard* originally referred to a board in a horse-drawn carriage that helped prevent mud from splashing on occupants. When the automobile was invented, the term was usurped and the original hardware was hacked into something that we all recognize today as the crucial set of performance indicators available to a driver during a road trip. It was this familiarity (almost everyone knows what an automobile dashboard is) that caused the computer industry to associate the term to the summary displays in executive information systems, but that’s—unfortunately—where the hacking stopped, leaving gaping vulnerabilities that have been exploited by the most insidious parts of the metaphor.

The dashboard in an automobile has the various elements it does because the make sense for the context. Gauges react to the point-in-time changes we make by accelerating or decelerating; we get an accurate—but not necessarily precise—understanding of fuel supply and battery condition; and, we know how far we’ve gone—all at a quick glance. Somewhere along the way, designers of executive information systems forgot the concept of “makes sense for the context” and brought these (and other) real-world elements into the digital world.

Gauges, dials, thermometers, stoplights and other skeuomorphic elements consume valuable space, rarely communicate information better than other visual elements, but *can* hold useful information, including:

* Current value of some key measure(s)
* Comparison to some target measure(s)
* A range of possible values of the measure(s) with a qualitative association

Consider Splunk’s dashboard example for “Notable Events by Security Domain” gauges in Figure 10.1:

Figure 10.1 [793725c10f01.jpg]

If we apply the knowledge gained from Chapter 6, we can reimagine this set of gauges as a more compact set of bullet graphs (Figure 10.2), though we have to invent some of the comparative measures and guess at the quantitative scale since the original did not encode those well (or, at all). This new view makes it much easier to see where we are exceeding event thresholds in various areas.

Figure 10.2 [793725c10f02.jpg]

type="general"

Bullet Graph Basics

The bullet graph is a fairly new chart type, especially when compared to more traditional visualizations, such as bar charts and line graphs. They were invented in 2005 by Stephen Few as a way to incorporate the positive attributes of gauges into a more utilitarian graphic. As such, there is a bit of a learning curve both in creating them (encoding) and understanding (decoding) them.

Figure 10.3 [793725c10f03.eps]`

As seen in Figure 10.3, there are five core components of a bullet graph:

* A bar that encodes the actual item you are measuring and trying to communicate the value of
* The overall scale of measures
* At least one marker with a comparative measure
* Background shades or colors that represent qualitative ranges for values
* A label for the bullet graph

The sixth component—the actual value of the SIEM events per second on the right hand side in Figure 10.3—is optional, but useful if your consumers would benefit from the precision.

While our examples here are sized a bit larger for the purposes of explanation, bullet graphs resize/shrink quite well without losing their ability to communicate effectively and efficiently.

The value change is also important to display, but the giant red, upward pointing arrows do not help to tell an accurate story. We can augment the bullet graph with paired sparklines—“data-intense, design-simple, word-sized graphics” (*Tufte*)—of each 24-hour measure to provide a quick picture of what happened in the various event streams.

Figure 10.4 [793725c10f04.jpg]

Examples of how to create these enhanced dashboard elements in Excel, R and with Google Charts are provided on the book’s web site. Ironically, Splunk has a rich visualization library that includes bullet graphs and sparklines, so if you’re building your dashboards in that tool, ditch the gauges and switch to the more informative options.

A Dashboard Is Not A Report

IT professionals tend to be very detail oriented. We are the type of people who got excited at the “show your work” directive on school assignments and love to dig into the details to show folks how we arrived at whatever conclusions we have come to. It’s absolutely necessary to have multiple levels of detail behind the dashboards we create to enable verification/validation and to support drilling into specific areas as needed. However, the top-level view should be designed solely to give the consumer situational awareness for the desired task. Just because an automobile’s OBD-II system can tell you the value of the “*Bank 2, Sensor 3: Oxygen sensor voltage, Short term fuel trim*” does not mean that we need another gauge in our car that displays this value while we’re driving. The “check engine” light is enough for us to know that something requires more deliberate attention and detailed examination.

Do not take this caution to mean that text, lists and tables should not be used in a dashboard. Those elements are valid to include where precision is necessary, provided they support quick perception, comprehension and a call to action. If we wanted to communicate the SIEM events per second from Figure 10.3 with just straight text, there are multiple possibilities as shown in Figure 10.5.

Figure 10.5 [793725c10f05.pdf]

In most cases, it’s best to display a graphic versus large amounts of tabular data; just be ready to call up specific values or provide the table if there is a call to action that requires a detailed review before making a decision. This can be easily done online, since most “dashboard” tools provide some sort of drill-down capability. For printed or non-interactive dashboards, you can provide a standalone, supplemental report or a link to an online resource that supports further investigation.

type="note"

A Dashboard As A “Trust Contract”

There is an inherent, two-way “trust contract” between dashboard consumers and dashboard producers. To be most effective, dashboard consumers must trust that the summarized views they are interpreting represent a good-faith attempt at providing the most accurate data in the most effective way possible. Similarly, there must be a level of trust on the part of the producers that the messenger “won’t be shot” for providing honest, accurate information (no matter how distressing it may be).

You might argue that this goes without saying, but how many times have you been in a dashboard review meeting where you cringed at some measure being reported as acceptable when you knew that there was cause for concern (especially as it relates to the status of highly visible projects). This is a clear sign of a broken trust contract.

The other major sign of a broken trust contract lies at the heart of why most dashboards either miscommunicate or over-communicate information. It’s a far easier task to take a swag at something and put a green stoplight in a PowerPoint document than it is to admit you don’t have enough real data to back the analysis and quantification of an important measure. Similarly, constant requests by consumers to “show the work” for every measure on a dashboard have been a major contributing factor to most dashboards becoming multi-screen, glorified reports.

It’s vital to establish and maintain this trust contract if dashboards will become or continue to be an effective management tool at your organization.

A Dashboard Is Not A Moving Van

Boxes are great for shipping items, but they are detrimental to the effective display of information on a dashboard as seen in Figure 10.6.

Figure 10.6 [793725c10f06.jpg]

Most of the elements contained in those boxes are, themselves, boxes, making the extra framing redundant. Excessive framing is often an issue with online dashboards given how many interfaces tend to align items to singular cells in a fixed grid and provide options for “on-the-fly” modification.

We can take Figure 10.6 and do a quick transformation by removing superfluous markings, borders and annotations. We’ll also take the opportunity to change the encoding of some of the measures to enhance the readability.

Figure 10.7 [793725c10f07.jpg]

The whitespace now frames each element and there is a more cohesive feel to the entire dashboard. We’ve removed the map, since a color-coded table is a better choice for the type of information displayed and replaced the “funnel” with a normalized, grouped bullet graph. We significantly reduced the “chart junk” and used a more subdued color palette. There are still some core issues with this dashboard. The individual elements seem “slammed” together with almost no opportunity for logical groupings. The foremost issue is that there are no indicators of what is good or bad (we had to fabricate thresholds for the bullet graphs in order to use them). Without those indicators, a dashboard like this falls more into the “report” category, though it falls short of those requirements as well.

It’s important to note that the single-cell, fixed-grid is not your only option. Figure 10.8 shows sample layout combinations that can layer on top of a virtual 3x3, landscape grid to provide more room for larger or more prominent chart types or to allow for logical groupings of elements that naturally fit together. You must take your output medium into consideration when planning your dashboard elements and layout. Your dashboard may look wonderful on the 27-inch “retina” display where you designed it, but it may be unintelligible on a standard resolution, 15” laptop screen. There may also be times when a more vertical (portrait) layout works better with the data you need to present, so you should not box yourself into a corner by only having one layout system handy.

Be sure to follow the advice on eye movements given in Chapter and reserve the upper left area for the most critical information that needs attention by your consumers.

Figure 10.8 [793725c10f08.pdf]

A Dashboard Is Not An Art Show

Given the graphical nature of a dashboard, it’s easy to fall into the trap of making them look like pieces of modern (or fringe) art when they are far more akin to architectural/industrial diagrams that require more controlled, deliberate and constrained design. To put it simply: just because you *can* do something in the context of a dashboard does not mean you *should*. Take Figure 10.9, for example:

Figure 10.9 [793725c10f09.png]

This is an example of a management-level dashboard in AlienVault’s OSSIM. It does a great job showcasing various esoteric chart types available to OSSIM users but does little to provide a quick overview of the security posture of the fictional organization it represents.

Figure 10.10 [793725c10f10.png]

TrustNet’s system dashboard (Figure 10.10) pushes the artistic envelope even further with considerable use of various 3D charts.

To be effective, dashboards must be pleasant to view so there must *some* amount of artistic choice going into the creation. However, it’s necessary to design within constraints. It’s similar to the difference between free verse poetry and more formal types, such as haiku or a Shakesperian sonnet where cstraints provide context for creativity without muting it in any way. Likewise, there are some design guidelines that can help channel your creative side when building dashboards.

Limit chart types

When encoding information into a chart, stick with the ones that are easiest for consumers to decode. Some good choices (that were covered in Chapter 6) are:

* Bar graphs/Bullet Graphs
* Dot plots/Scatter Plots
* Line Graphs/Sparklines
* Box Plots
* Spatial/Heat/Tree Maps

Limit the diversity of chart types used in any single dashboard and ensure that the chart you’ve chosen is the most appropriate one for the type of information you are encoding. Tools such as Chart Chooser (http://labs.juiceanalytics.com/chartchooser/index.html) by Juice Analytics and Chart Suggestions (http://extremepresentation.typepad.com/files/choosing-a-good-chart-09.pdf) can help refresh your memory if our book isn’t handy and you are unsure which chart to use.

Remember space constraints

You have one page/screen. That’s it. Choose the best encoding element for the medium you are using. This may mean re-thinking the types of elements you choose for the encoding if you learn your consumers prefer viewing information on their phone or mini-tablet-sized screens.

You should also be wary of cramming elements into that single screen and use whitespace whenever possible to group and separate elements. If the information density of the dashboard is too high to enable the use of whitespace, subtle placement of very light lines and borders can be used to facilitate the same grouping and separation.

Take care with colors

Choose a focused color palette and stick with it throughout the dashboard. Color has a strong ability to tie elements together, even when they are separated on screen. Your consumers may draw erroneous correlations if your dashboard lacks color consistency.

Remember the lessons of Chapter 6 and also consider that your digital creations may find their way to a black and white laser printer more often than you would like to admit. Make sure your creations can withstand such a transformation without completely losing their meaning.

Use fonts wisely

Stick to a single font if at all possible. Choose either serif (e.g. Palatino or Times New Roman) or sans-serif (e.g. Verdana or Arial) and be consistent where and how you apply the font. If you look to more modern or esoteric font choices, be sure to select one that scales consistently, supports variable width text and has fixed-width numbers. Finally, use **bold**, *italics* and **color** with fonts to highlight important qualitative elements.

There Is No One Dashboard To Rule Them All

From their first physical incarnations, dashboards have been living, evolving organisms. For example, the dashboard on the Ford Model T—produced back in 1908—contained a single element: an ammeter (an instrument used to measure the electric current) that helped show the health of ignition magneto: one of the only components that could not be inspected by visually without a specialized instrument. To know the status of gas reserves, one just checked the dipstick. To see if the car is overheating, one just looked for the signs of smoke and steam coming out of the engine compartment.

Drivers who were concerned about violating the speed limit (8mph city/20mph highway) *could* purchase an optional speedometer (which joined the ammeter as a standard equipment eight years later). It was also possible to replace the radiator gap with a “motometer”, a very fancy and expensive temperature gauge that was more for show than substance. As we became more dependent on the automobile we traded in dipsticks for dashboard elements. Engine temperature and fuel supply gauges joined the ammeter and speedometer in displaying instant, critical information to the drivers without leaving the comfort of the driver’s seat.

Dashboards in many modern cars retain most of the same elements as the updated Model T instrument panel, but some require new and customized elements to monitor the performance of their electric, natural gas or hybrid systems. Similarly, cars that can switch between two-wheel and four-wheel drive require a special indicator letting the driver know which mode they are operating in.

This same process of evolution and customization should occur in the digital realm where each dashboard must be tailored to:

* The specific process(es) being monitored
* The consumers of the information
* The display medium
* The data available for encoding
* The expected update frequency

For example, when creating a dashboard for the CISO, it is unlikely she will want to or needs to consume/evaluate/respond to the events per second metric of the enterprise SIEM. However, this is a performance measure that the Security Operations Manager may be keenly interested in.

Similarly, if there have been some issues with the performance of the SIEM, you should consider adding salient performance measures to the interactive, daily or weekly operations dashboard until the situation is verified to be resolved. Once stable, the measure can be replaced with other important items requiring evaluation and response.

The only way to know what belongs on a dashboard is to have regular dialog with the various consumers to understand what they care about and inform them as to what data is available. This will help identify and resolve gaps in your ability to provide situational awareness for a given process. If a dashboard developed two years ago has never changed, chances are good that your organization is not using dashboards effectively.

Remember: the **objectives define the dashboard**.

What Is A Dashboard, Anyway?

In Summary

Recommended Reading

Information Dashboard Design

Security Metrics

Quantitative Display…