



"If I can see immediately that my sales trend is changing and adjust costs immediately, by firing people or not launching a new initiative, that's a big advantage," Mr. Schulman said.

The trend might also help cure the fuzzy accounting methodology that has gripped some corporations in recent years, according to Lauren Jones Shu, research director for GartnerG2, the business research division of the Gartner consulting company. "This will definitely make it harder to cheat," she said.

One PricewaterhouseCoopers client, a retailer that Mr. Schulman would not identify, has built a cockpit that presents not just the key business data, but also the reasons behind the numbers. If sales at a store crash on a day when half of the salespeople fail to show up for work, the system will make the connection between the two and indicate as much to company executives.

Most companies opt to deliver the data via intranets, so managers can see the data wherever they log on, Mr. Schulman said. Others, perhaps yearning for a NASA ambience, opt for a control-room environment, where different monitors display different fiscal measurements.

Whatever the approach, the display is actually the easiest part of creating the cockpits. The first step is automating the data-collection process, so that a sale, invoice or manufacturing glitch is instantly logged in a computer system. Next, companies must integrate the data from various business units and their hybrid technology systems. Finally, executives must agree on a handful of key measures to track in the dashboard, and their definitions.

The latter point can be particularly vexing for bigger companies with many different divisions — each with an entrenched view on how to define something as simple as revenue. "Is gross revenue the most meaningful measure?" Mr. Schulman said. "Net revenue?"

To illustrate his point, Mr. Schulman told of a telecommunications client with two divisions that followed different definitions of revenue. While each hit their respective revenue targets, the company — which he would not name — missed its overall target. "So it's critical to choose one that's right for the company and stay consistent," he said.

[Honeywell](#), which manufactures aircraft cockpits, among other things, favors the "digital dashboard" terminology, according to Gary Bird, the company's vice president for digitization. Mr. Bird said it put more emphasis on digital dashboards starting last year, when it pressed to get "weekly and daily visibility of data.

"As we've been able to get more data on more of a real-time basis, people can't deal with the amount of information that's generated, so it's made sense to change to more graphic ways to visualize it," Mr. Bird said.

That can engender a cultural shift inside a company, he added, since managers and their employees must become accustomed to faster decisions.

"There's definitely a mindset shift," Mr. Bird said. "I have certain orthodoxies about what's acceptable in terms of how fast to make decisions, and I need to rethink those.

