

Business Infographics for ITIL

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In this eBook we are going to look at how to use the hugely popular 'infographics' approach to data presentation and how it can be applied to complement an ITIL reporting suite.

Infographics have traditionally been aimed at the general public and created as one off pieces of art. But with recent improvements in reporting software and a little effort, infographics can be used to direct focus to specific metrics in a variety of mediums.

This eBook is split into three sections - we will first look at the traits of an infographic; in Section 2 the focus is on how infographics can be of value to ITIL reporting. The final section presents a series of examples of ITIL Infographics to show how the theory works in real life and how they can aid your business.

Section 1:

Infographics

Traditional Infographic Definition

"Information graphics or infographics are graphic visual representations of information, data or knowledge intended to present information quickly and clearly. They can improve cognition by utilizing graphics to enhance the human visual system's ability to see patterns and trends."

The definitions I have seen for "infographics", like the one above from Wikipedia, could all be used interchangeably for a "chart" or "graph". This may not be a problem for the public at large, but for those of us with an ITIL or Business Intelligence view of the world it is quite meaningless.

A Very Loose Definition of Infographics!

Obviously, the above does not break any new ground in reporting offerings but infographics do have traits that separate them from more generic charts.

What follows is a list of traits that I consider set infographics apart:

1a. Narrow Focus: Data

One or two data points are usually enough for an infographic to display clearly even when multiple metrics are required.

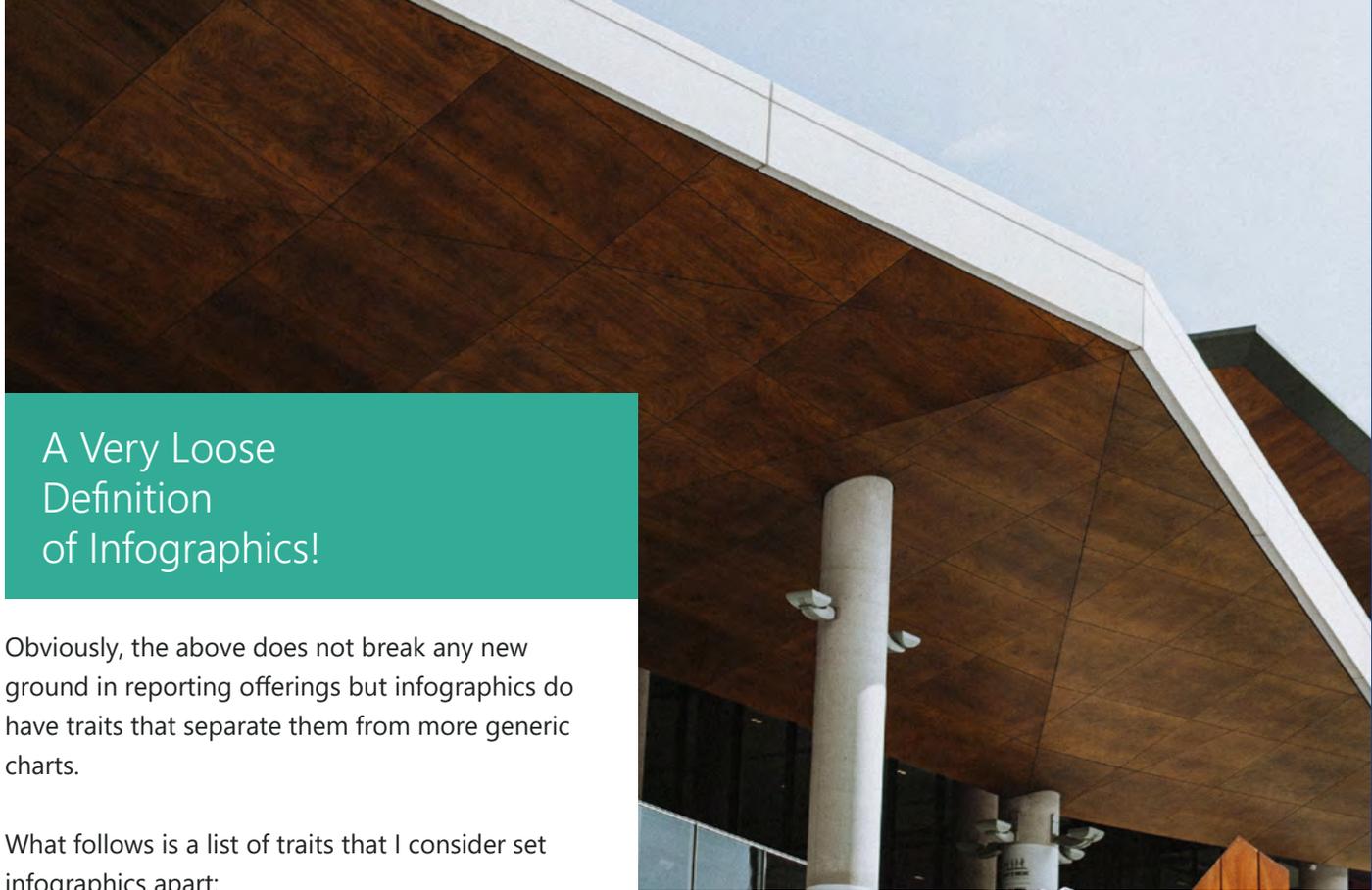
1b. Narrow Focus: Metric

Infographics tend to only focus on one or two measurements to illustrate a particular point. An infographic crammed with measures becomes a cluttered dashboard, something nobody wants!

2. Wide Audience Focus

Unlike business reporting, which is traditionally distributed to an informed audience, an infographic should be clear to an unknown audience with a minimum of supporting labelling or documentation.

In reality, the narrow focus of traits 1a and 1b, makes this less of a challenge than with traditional charts and a meaningful chart title is often enough.



3. Artistic Visualization

Like all things art related, this is very much in the eye of the beholder.



As infographics are traditionally created by graphic artists without being hampered by the limitations of reporting software, they can enjoy infinite design freedom (within the job specification).

The flip side to this is that it is possible to create something approaching that which is created by an artist with reporting software. However, it depends greatly on the reporting software used, as to how artistic a chart can be developed.

Because of the variation in reporting software, the example infographics provided in this eBook may not be straight-forward to recreate identically but some close approximation should be achievable regardless of reporting product.

Not all of the above traits are required to consider a chart an infographic, but the more it has, the more of an infographic it is.

Traits 1a & 1b can be one of either or both - having narrow data measured against multiple metrics will often make a good infographic, as will several data points measured against one metric. Lots of both and more traditional charting/reporting techniques can be employed.

In cases where only one or two traits apply, an infographic may not be the way to display the target data. After all, the point of data reporting is to present it in the most suitable manner for the audience to consume.

Traditional Infographics

With a little imagination, all charts could be considered infographics, but any given infographic can be anything from the chart style we are predominately interested in to heavily illustrated magazine article types.

A quick internet search will show what a broad spectrum "infographics" cover, many of which could be created dynamically and be data driven, but in most instances the business requirement is likely to be more in the style of a traditional chart. This is driven by two main factors:

1. Familiarity in data visualization.

Obviously, the point of this eBook is to introduce a new concept (namely ITIL Infographics!) but that is not a license to create over the top or extravagant visualization. The audience is used to traditional style reporting and deviating too far from this norm will cause instant caution, when the goal is to produce something people are happier to look at!

The audience should be cooing over the clarity, functionality and artistry not be befuddled by your design choices!

2. Being data driven.

The requirement is that an ITIL (or any business related) Infographic has to be data driven! There is no possible way an ever-changing infographic can be manually redrawn every time as a pure logistical problem.

Charts are integrally designed to resize and reformat data visualization dynamically: making them the clear favorite, but to be honest, the main issue here is that traditional reporting software tends to not contain the functionality.



Section 2:

ITIL Infographics

Infographics for ITIL?

So, the previous section is all exciting enough, but can infographics be used for ITIL?

Obviously, I consider the answer to this question a resounding “YES”, especially whenever a specific metric becomes more important than their peers.

Assuming metrics have peers, of course, there can be several reasons why a particular metric may be of increased interest:

Poor Service Performance.

The most obvious and depressing reason to give special treatment to a specific metric is that it is routinely failing its SLA and requires special attention. An infographic is a great way to direct focus to the troublesome area, especially when said infographic is distributed regularly through a widely viewed medium.

Changes to Support Processes

Practically speaking, changes to a support process are the same as new project driven changes, but they tend to happen a lot more when driven by the Change Management Team and maybe of particular interest while the confidence in the amendments is justified.

Key/Parent Service

A parent service that is relied upon for a range of ‘child’ services is important enough and narrow enough in scope to make an ideal infographic. Networks are a good example, as is email, intranet or any other service that will be a part of other services across the organization.

Suspected Scalability Issues.

Scalability issues can steadily build up as an organization expands incrementally without much notice. Of all the things that can impact performance of IT service, an increase in data volume from more employees is often overlooked until it impacts software licenses.

And once again, an infographic is ideal to display increases in volume, whether it is user ticket volume increases (something which rarely comes with its own metric... and it shouldn't, unless as a means to measure the long term effectiveness of Problem and Change Management work to solve ongoing issues) or increased use of any particular service.

Project Work Implementation

Any amendments or new introductions of services caused by a project may require closer scrutiny. It is nothing new to include targeted reporting on new or impacted services due to project work, but often the performance information required to monitor the new implementation is very narrow in focus. This is ideal for an infographic, rather than a half empty (or half full, if you're an optimist!) traditional report.

In the next section I will run through some specific examples that may be directly applicable to your ITIL solution, but if not, they provide enough inspiration to consider which metrics require this focused treatment.

ITIL Infographics: Where?

How and where to distribute ITIL infographics is determined greatly by existing infrastructure and reporting software available.

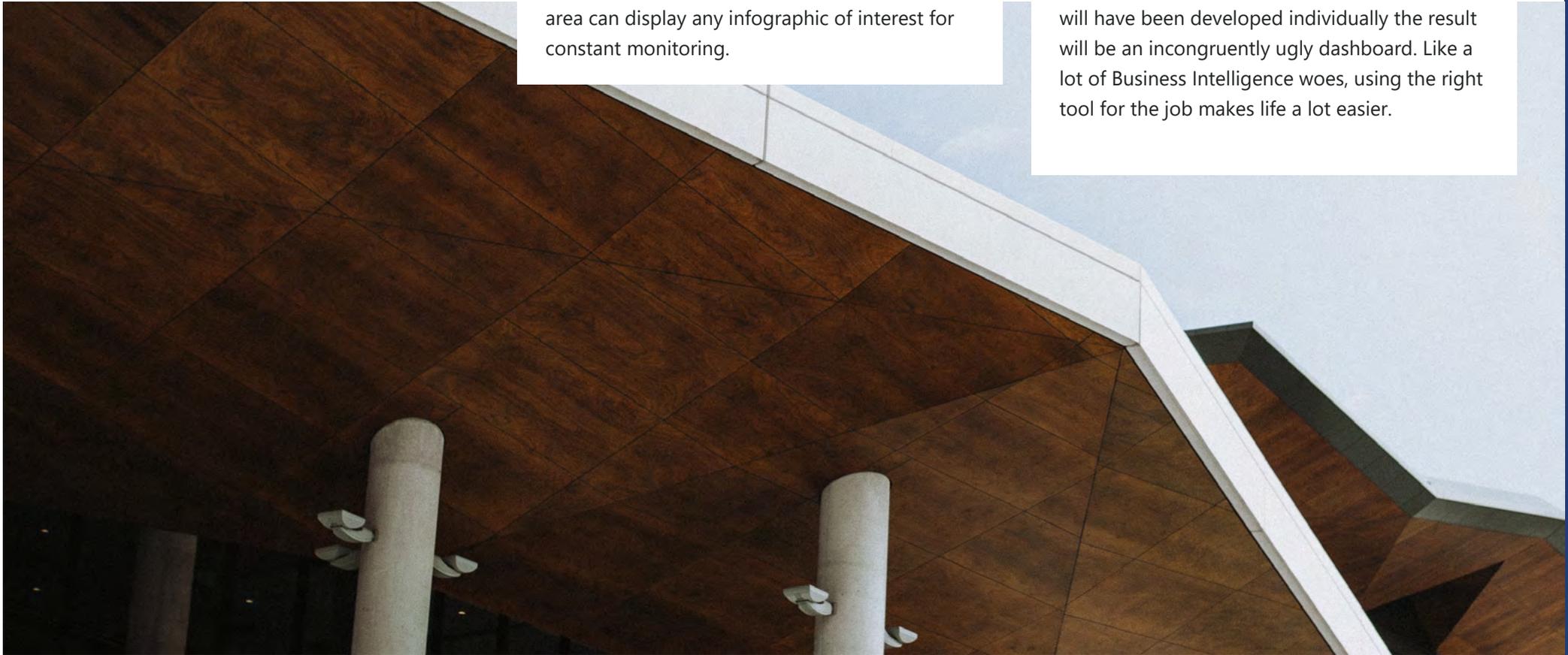
Putting technical issues to a side for the moment, the general answer is: wherever the audience will see it! The nature of infographics means they should be easy to place in most electronic forms of communication.

The first ITIL Infographic example in the next section focuses on Availability for one Service. If the purpose of this infographic is to keep it in the forefront of the Service's Resolver Team mind, then placing it on the team intranet page or in a prominent place on their OLA reports.

Any team fortunate enough to have a permanent display screen mounted in their area can display any infographic of interest for constant monitoring.

However, if the audience is higher up in the organization, they would be interested in that Availability Infographic because a team(s) of their own could be impacted.

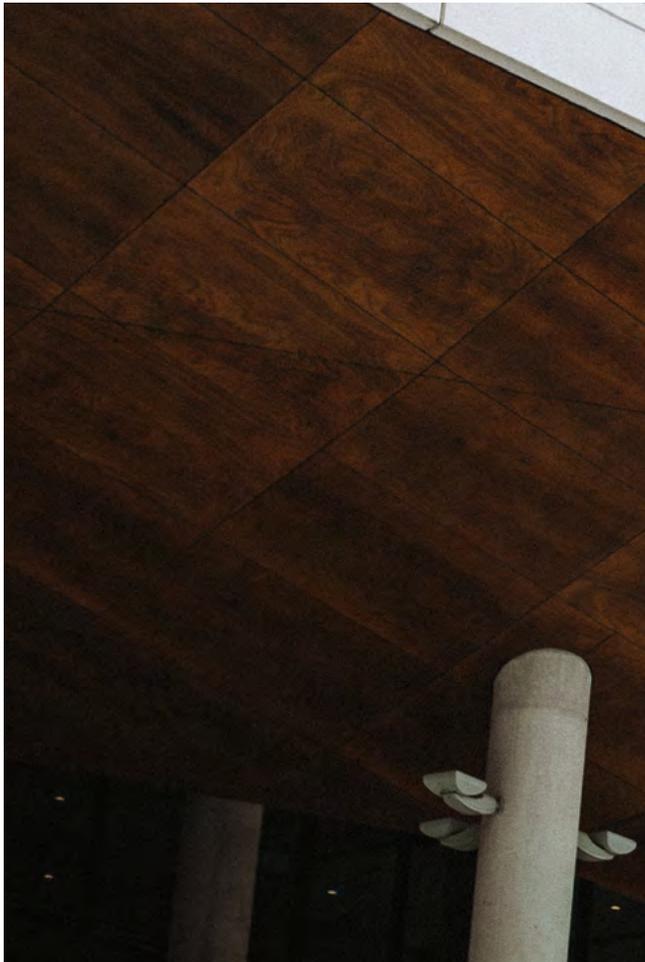
Warning: The thing to avoid here is a 'summary' page ram packed with infographics. This is called a 'Dashboard', and as the infographics will have been developed individually the result will be an incongruently ugly dashboard. Like a lot of Business Intelligence woes, using the right tool for the job makes life a lot easier.



Refresh Times

Refresh time for tradition infographics is not normally something to consider due to their manual creation.

Creating infographics that are data driven means they are tied to the same three overriding factors that govern the availability of usual BI reporting, namely:



1. How often relevant data is added to the underlying ITIL software.

Automated system updates aside, it is often the case that any support issue is not known about until a ticket is raised by an impacted user.

2. Length of time lag caused by data warehouse processing.

While overnight lag for data warehouse processing has become the norm, mature ITIL reporting for bigger organizations (primarily those with a global presence where 'overnight' doesn't really exist) can require constant updates throughout the whole twenty four hours of the day as the ITIL support software is in constant use.*

Due to the narrow focus of a good infographic, it is often feasible to populate it with data from the source system and bypass the data warehouse completely. This may not always be possible, especially if a lot of transformation work is done with the data warehouse, but is worth considering if the warehouse processing time is rendering the infographic outdated.

3. Audience requirements.

Last, but hopefully, not least, the actual audience for the infographic may need it for certain routine meetings or on a short time schedule when monitoring the ongoing health of a service.

*I have personally worked on a large ITIL Business Intelligence where the data warehouse was updated every fifteen minutes.

ITIL Infographic Examples

This section contains three examples of Business Infographic, with each highlighting the advantage of a particular Infographic trait:

ITIL Infographic Example 1: Service Availability

Strong icon and color
use to tell a story.

ITIL Infographic Example 3: Change Management (Late Requests)

A comparatively arty display to
illustrate a focused data set.

ITIL Infographic Example 2: Service Desk

Using more exotic
charting options to show
paired KPI results.

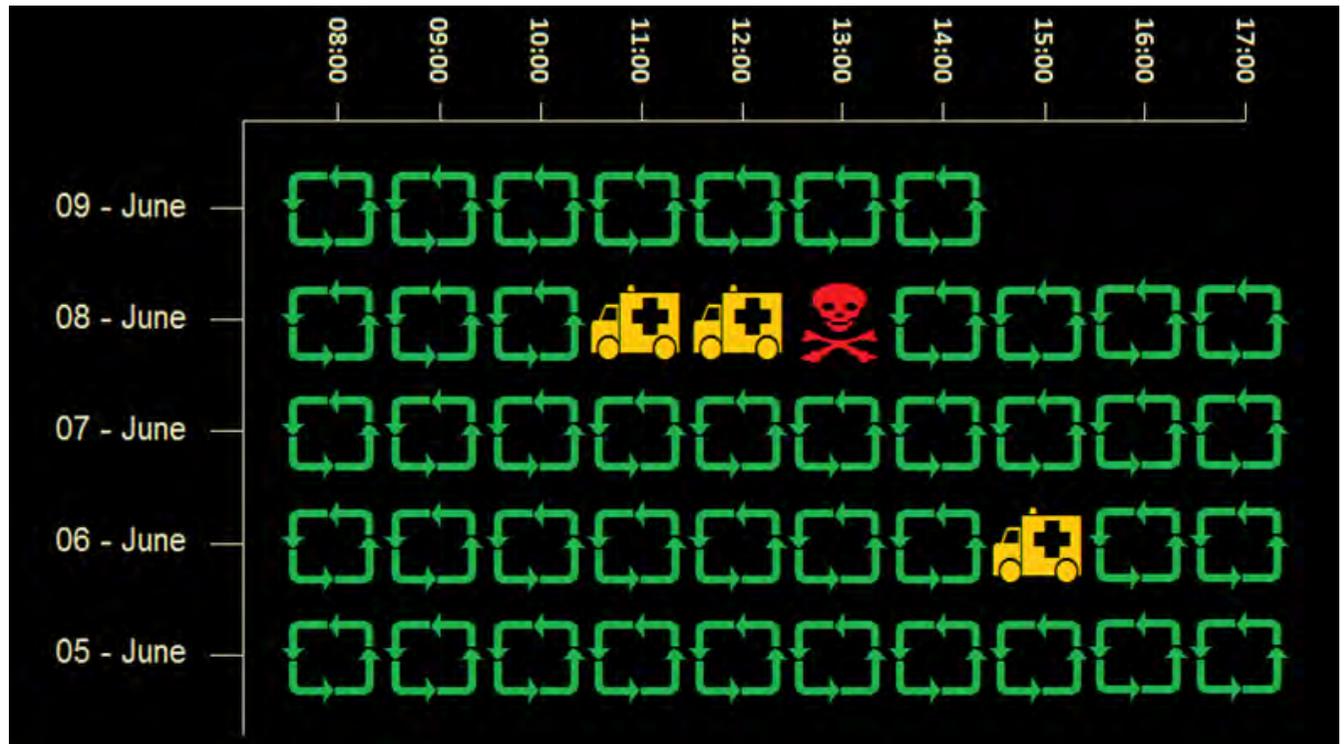
In order to keep this section as agnostic as possible, no main titles have been included with these examples. What makes a good Business Infographic title is a lot more dependent on its context within the wider publication than is the case with traditional reporting which tends to be its own document.

For example: if a Business Infographic is being featured as part of a management review on a specific service, there is no need to restate the service name in the title. The same approach applies to whether an infographic is based on one service or team, or a collection thereof.



ITIL Infographic Examples ITIL Infographic Example 1: Service Availability

As mentioned in the previous section, the first example we shall look at is an infographic that illustrates the performance of one Service against its Availability KPI.



By using strong color/shape combos to show the three states of the Service (namely; Live, Degradated and Interrupted) the audience can glance at this infographic and know the current state of the service and its recent history. And for this reason, there is little benefit to including a Legend.

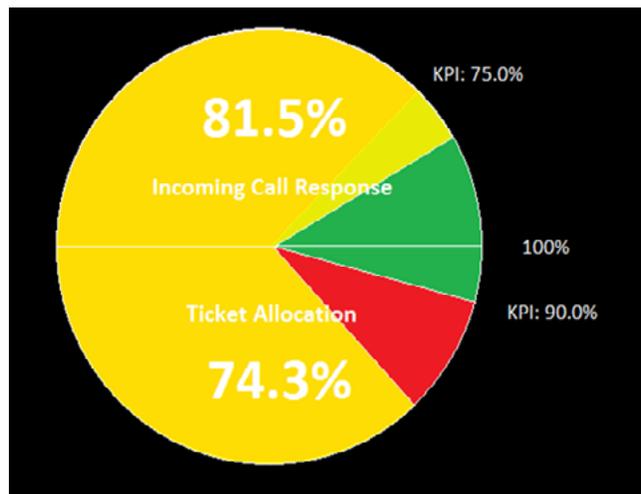
While this example shows the last five working days, a wider timeframe may be more meaningful if the audience is concerned with longer term trends. We can see in this example that an outage was preceded by two hours of a degraded service, if this pattern has repeated over previous weeks it may act as an early warning to future outages.

ITIL Infographic Example 2: Service Desk

For this example, we are going to look at a great way to display two complementing KPIs within the Service Desk, namely, Response Times (phone pickup) and Triage KPIs.

The importance of this duality of targets for Service Desks and achieving balance cannot be overstated. A Service Desk team member should be aiming for a balance between taking calls and triaging the resulting tickets without one succeeding to the detriment of the other.

By displaying these two KPIs as two halves of a circle it is easy to see how each KPI is performing in relation to its own target as well as its companion.

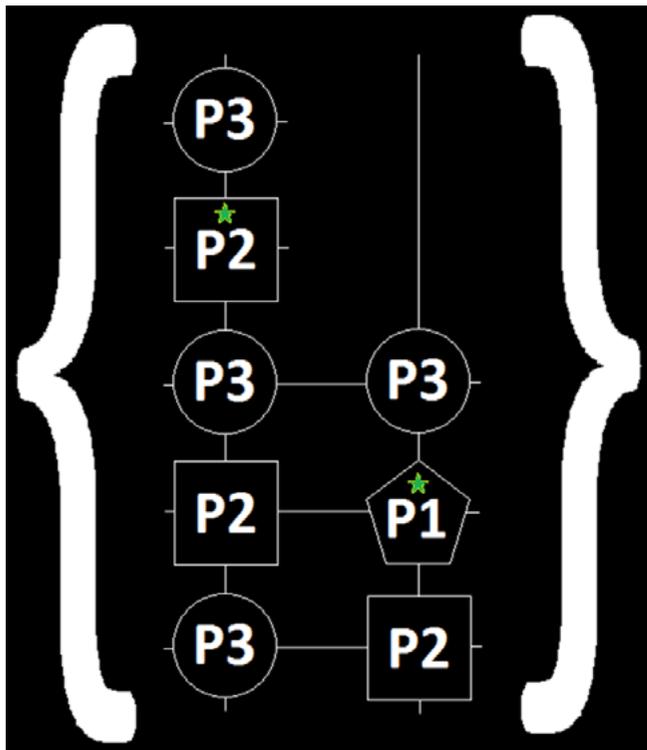


Unlike the previous example, this Business Infographic requires labelling to identify the different series and KPIs being illustrated.

An interesting variation would be to display a series of these charts showing the previous reporting periods with the size of each being aligned to the volume of calls received.

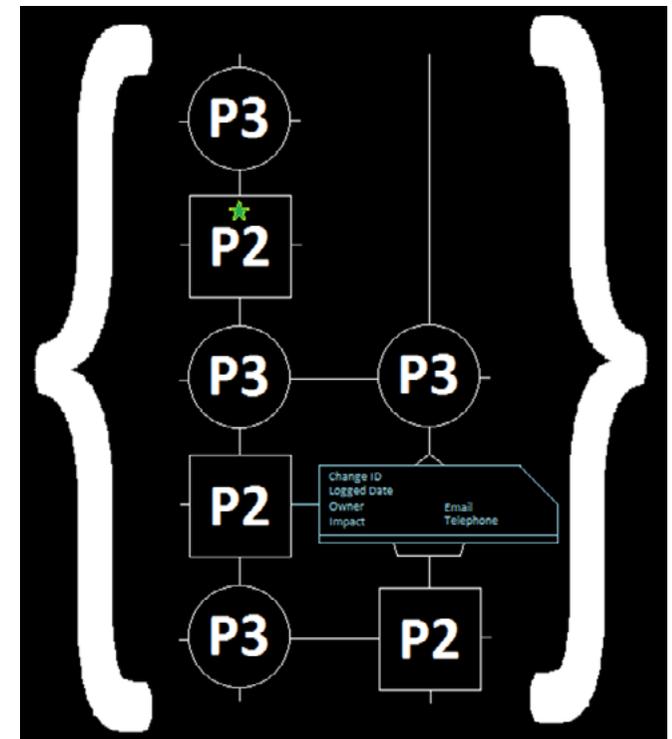
ITIL Infographic Example 3: Change Management (Late Requests)

This Business Infographic displays those annoying Change Requests which have been logged after the submission cut off.



Only the priority for each Request is displayed in the order they were logged. It could be the Change Impact, Service Name or whatever the audience will want to know first about a late Change Request. Whatever top level of data is used, the audience can drill down through each icon to view a brief summary of the Change Request.

From that point, the audience should have enough information to make further enquiries if they judge it prudent.



The key use for this Business Infographic is to quickly identify which Change Requests are late and if they warrant being included anyway. The green star identifies which (if any) late Change Requests have been accepted despite their lateness.

...and of course, the huge curly brackets make it clear these are exceptions!

Summary



Infographics are a great way to clearly display discrete information to a wide audience, and it is a shame that business reporting has yet to catch up with the trend.

In this eBook I have highlighted where the benefits of infographics in the business world really shine and make the extra development time worth the effort.

Speaking with my 'developer head', I also have to point out that they are great fun to do and a refreshing break from presenting tables of numbers!

As previously mentioned, infographics should be used individually, rather than as building blocks for a dashboard. The exception to this is if a standardized approach is taken for all infographics produced, but that defeats the object of infographics in the first place.

Infographics provide a great opportunity to try out new ideas without huge financial outlay, having to conform to pre-agreed format standards is very limiting. Another lost benefit is that infographics can lose their individual appeal to the audience once standardized and commonplace.

Used well, ITIL infographics will shine a visually pleasing light on any metric that is of specific concern or interest to the organization.

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