



Transcript for Session 044

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Transcript:

Hey there, what's up everybody? Welcome to <http://chandoo.org> podcast. This is session number 44. <http://chandoo.org> podcast is dedicated to making you awesome in data analysis, charting, dashboards, and VBA using Microsoft Excel.

Where do I begin? I have a very exciting announcement to share with you. This is about my new book. That's right! I have finally given into the pressure and have taken up a book project and written a book. Those of you who have been following <http://chandoo.org> since a while or have been at least listening to our podcast for a while do know that I have some books that are published. But, all the books that I have published so far are e-books. Most of them are self-published through either our own e-commerce platform or through Amazon. But, this book that I am talking about is called '**Dashboards for Excel**'. It is published by Apress and it is going to be a print book; a book that you can hold in your hand and read.

Here is the back story. Originally, this book was announced by a colleague and good friend Jordan. Jordan blogs at <http://optionexplicitvba.com>. As you can guess, it is a VBA and Advanced Excel blog. Jordan is a good friend of mine and he announced this book almost three years back on his blog. He said he is going to write this book about Excel dashboards and Advanced Excel development and VBA coding and what not. When I read about that announcement, of course I felt very happy for Jordan but I also felt a jealous! That's because I think of <http://chandoo.org> and myself as one of the experts on Excel dashboards. Many times people google Excel dashboards and they eventually come to <http://chandoo.org> and they tell me that this is the best resource about Excel dashboards that they have found online. So, when I read about Jordan's announcement, I naturally felt a bit jealous because I wondered why I never thought of this idea. Why didn't I think of writing a book on dashboards? I have courses on dashboards and I have live classes on dashboards and I have a ton of material, contests and all sorts of things on dashboards on my site. I have podcasts that are partially dedicated to dashboards. So, why didn't I think about writing a book on dashboards?

Well, there is nothing much that I could do because I kind of felt that writing a book and especially a print book is something that I would personally enjoy. So, fast forward two years to sometime around September last year, at around exactly the same time now, I got an email from Jordan. Jordan basically said that his book project is running late and they are planning to bring in an additional author and



asked if I would be willing to join this book project. I felt very happy to take up that invitation because not only would I get to collaborate with Jordan on a book that I felt very strongly about and felt that I should have written the book (!) but also Jordan had done almost all of the heavy lifting. He had completed 80% of the book by then. He was doing some editing and adding some new meat to the book. So, I only had to write a few chapters and I could call myself a co-author. It almost feels like cheating now! Of course, I confessed all this to Jordan when I met him in Santa Clara a few months back. It is such a good thing that he invited me and I felt really honored and humbled and very happy to accept his invitation. So, we immediately reached out to the Apress people and one thing led to another and I agreed to write 4 chapters. I took up the chapters on Power BI and Data Model capabilities of Excel. So, it was not exactly the dashboards part but how you can use all these extra features - Power Pivot, Power Query, Data Model and Excel pivot tables to create awesome dashboards. I took up those concepts and wrote four chapters.

Now, you might be thinking that if all this happened in September last year, how come you took one whole year to write just 4 chapters. Well, there is a reason for that too. After I agreed to write these four chapters, there were a lot of processes going on in Apress and by then Jordan, as I told you, had written a majority of the book and the Apress people were feeling a little frustrated because they couldn't complete the entire book and so the editor and Jordan got into an understanding and they said that they are going to take a portion of the book and release it as Advanced Excel Essentials. So, they launched another book in between and that kind of derailed the Dashboards for Excel book for some time. But, eventually, the book came out and then we all got on track and I started writing and I finished my copy and my drafts in June and then they went through a bunch of editorial stuff, editing and images and what not. And, finally, the book is releasing on 15th September. Now, my fingers are crossed because if I am releasing the book and if I commit to my audience and tell you on the podcast that the book is coming on 15th September, I would wake up on 15th September as early as possible and press the button so that Amazon can sell the book to you. But, because this is happening through a big company like Apress, we never know until the book hits the publisher because they release tons of books every month and there are lots of processes going on.

So, as of now, the information that I have is that the book is coming on 15th September and it is a book about Excel dashboards and I can assure you that it is going to be awesome. Not just because I have written it but because I have read Jordan's chapters too and they are just delightful. I like Jordan's style because he has very strong opinions about how we should develop Advanced Excel models and workbooks and he has a lot of depth and practical experience when it comes to building dashboards and Advanced Excel workbooks and VBA codes. So, it is going to be a really good companion for those of you who use various advanced Excel concepts for your work whether dashboards, modeling, VBA automation etc. This book is going to help you in your journey. So, if you are interested, head over to <http://chandoo.org/session44> and there you can find a link to the book. As a bonus to all the people who are buying this book in terms of early buying or pre-ordering the book or buying this book in the month of September 2015, Jordan and I are going to give you a 1-hour video lesson on some of our favorite dashboard tips. So, we will create a 1-hour video lesson. Essentially, each of us will speak for 30



minutes and we will talk about some of our favorite ways of doing dashboards and some tips and techniques and we will share that video with you in the first week of October. So, if you buy this book before end September, you will qualify for that extra bonus. All you have to do is purchase the book and email the receipt to dashboard.book@chandoo.org. The email address is dashboard.book@chandoo.org.

This is probably the longest introduction that I have ever had for a podcast. I apologize if you felt a little bored in between. But, that's because I don't write books every now and then, especially print ones. I write a lot of articles every day. So, I felt excited and I wanted to share this good news with you. Thank you so much, even if you are not buying the book, for sticking with <http://chandoo.org>, learning from me and supporting us on all these days.

Let's jump into the topic of the day which is **'My first dashboard was a failure and what I learnt from it'**. They say that failures are the best lessons. I was actually reading a quotation yesterday - You learn a lot from success stories but you learn even a lot more from failure stories. This is by one of the great Presidents of India, APJ Abdul Kalam. He recently passed away and he has been an inspiration and motivator for many millions of people in India and abroad. His quotation is something that resonates deeply with me because many of the great lessons in my life came because of a failure that I had. Naturally the first dashboard that I created was a failure and that ended up teaching me a lot more about dashboards than any other dashboard that I created. So, I am going to share this personal story and lesson with you along with some resources to help you make better dashboards in your life.

In June or early July 2006, I got my very first job as a Business Analyst. Until then, I worked for one year as a Software Engineer and then I went for my management degree, post which I joined as a Business Analyst. The Business Analyst role is something that I cherished and wanted to do and so I was very excited when I joined this company. As you can guess when you are a fresh graduate from a college and you go into a company, one thing that happens unless you are doing something that is very basic like pushing files or something is that nobody trusts you. So, when I joined this company, I was still treated as wet behind my ears and I was not given any real work and this kind of frustrated me in the initial weeks. I was basically bouncing around from one cubicle to another talking to my supervisors and my managers and trying to see if I can take up any project or anything. But they were all like I am too new and don't know anything here and if they gave me something worthwhile I might even mess it up. So, they didn't want to give me anything right away; they wanted me to stick around and do some research and learn about their processes and business before they trusted me with some work. This went for about 3-6 weeks. I kind of had all this excitement bubbling inside me. I wanted to do something worthwhile; I wanted to do something awesome. So, my boss called me into her cabin one day after a couple of months of working like this and she said that here was something that she thought was really interesting and right up my sleeve when it comes to analysis and all the skills that I had. So, she gave me a balance score card. A balance score card is essentially like a dashboard or a management report. She gave me a balance score card template. She didn't really give it to me physically; she emailed the file to



me while we were talking and she said that this was a balance score card template that they have been working with for the last several years and she wanted me to take a look at it and she wanted me to come up with a better version of it. She wanted me to come up with a newer version of it because they were not very happy with it.

I thought that this was an exciting project because the balance score card that she gave me is something that goes to the CEO of the company on a quarterly basis and our company was a really big one and I was working in one of the verticals of that company. There were about 8 verticals and I was working in one of them. So, if I could do good work on the balance score card, it could help present my boss in a very good light when it came to CEO reporting. Naturally, she would be happy and if she was happy, then my career would be on a good track. So, I figured that if I could do a good job on this balance score card then people would appreciate my skills and give me more projects and I would be a rockstar at work. I wanted to do an awesome job on the balance score card or dashboard in other words. I quickly rushed from her cabin to my cubicle - almost ran from there to my cubicle - and opened up the file. I saw that it was basically an Excel workbook and Power Point presentation. The scorecard is basically a presentation but the entire ground work for that is done inside an Excel file. So, I wanted to come up with a better way of representing things. Of course, I was in a hurry. I wanted to do this and impress her but then I realised that I didn't know much about balance score cards.

So, the next thing that I did was that I did a bit of research about scorecards. I went to our company library and borrowed some books about balance score cards and read about them. I understood what a lead measure is, what a lag measure is and all sorts of stuff and did this for a few weeks. I came up with lots of variations and then after two or three weeks, I prepared the new version of the balance score card. I took this balance score card and went to my boss and told her that I had a newer version available and asked her if she would like me to present it. She told me to go ahead. I started presenting the scorecard and 5 minutes into the presentation she said that this was not what she wanted and she asked me to leave here room. I was depressed and didn't know what to do. I was devastated at the output. This is the first failure that I had in my professional career until that point and it was about a project that I kind of felt very confident and optimistic about. I wanted to create a report that she would be happy with but instead I made something that completely maddened her. She asked me to get out!

So, what went wrong? Why do you think my first dashboard was a failure? Those of you who have attended a live class that I run or even our online classes on Excel School might have heard a part of this story or all of it. This is a podcast and so you can't tell me what you are thinking unless you go to our site and leave a comment there. So, I am going to give you the answer.

Because I was super excited about this project and I wanted to do a good job, I kind of rushed through the entire thing. Instead, I should have spent an hour or two with her, sitting down and understanding why this version of the balance score card was not working. What needed to change? What was the



motivation for change? What were the problems or issues with the current version and what is it that she was looking for in the newer version? I never asked any of these questions. Maybe I asked some of these questions at a very high level but not a very in-depth level. In other words, I didn't spend enough time with the user of this dashboard to understand the information needs that they had. This is the biggest mistake that I think anybody can make and I made this mistake a couple of times in my life and I understood the hard way that if you don't pay attention to what your users want, you are going to produce something that is awful and pathetic. So, I produced something like a balance score card. Probably, technically, it was really good. I went with the definition of balance score card, I looked at the current version and I tried to come up with something that was even better not only by definition but also by using better techniques in Excel and Power Point. But, that was not enough because I never really understood what my boss wanted. So, if you also don't spend enough time with your audience and if you don't interview them and don't ask important questions and dig deep about the motivation for your users, you are going to produce lousy and clumsy reports. That's the truth. So, this is the hard lesson that I learnt. Once I understood that, I immediately realised where things were going wrong and I spent a lot more time with here talking about what was wrong with the current set-up and where things needed to change, and, accordingly, I improved the balance score card. And, they have been using that new version of the balance score card for several years. I don't know whether they are using it now or not. I quit the company in 2010. But, until I left, I know they were using a version of that to do the quarterly reporting.

So, that's the story of my first dashboard failure. I kind of jumped into the deep end without asking a lot of questions and I practically drowned with my dashboard! So, the lessons for you are that whenever you are setting out to create a dashboard or a report or even a VBA application or a complex model or a financial model or an analysis workbook or something like that, spend some time. Depending on how big the workbook is - if it is going to be a very complex workbook like big data analysis or a business intelligence project, maybe you want to spend a month talking to your users. If it is something small like a monthly report, spend at least half an hour or one hour with your users, understand what they want and then produce the report according to those needs. This stage is usually called **requirement analysis**. You don't hear about requirement analysis in the world of dashboards or business intelligence reports because many people kind of overlook it. They think they know what they want there but that's completely wrong. Even for a dashboard you want to have a requirement analysis stage. This is where you basically sit with your users, ask them a lot of questions - what do you want, why do you want this, why do you need the information about sales trend, what about the expenditure trend, what kind of sales trend are we looking at, are we talking about dollars or quantity, if it is dollars then why not quantity, even in the dollars sense what is it that you are really looking for, are you interested to know whether the sales are going up or down or what kind of pattern they are following - and all sorts of questions like this. So, keep asking questions one level deeper after every answer. So, ask the question why they need this at least three times at different levels so that you can get a satisfactory answer about what it is that your users really want. What is their information need? And, then, you can satisfy that information need using your dashboard. That's the key lesson here and this is something that I learnt in a very hard way. Especially when you face such rejection early on in your career it can have a negative impact but, for me, it helped immensely because I kind of thrived on that feedback and



criticism and I immediately bounced back and went back and created something that was beautiful. Not only that, but when I did that I ended up learning a whole bunch of Excel features, ideas and concepts that I did not know prior to that and it kind of helped me in a very beautiful way all through my life. Those Excel things that I learnt early on motivated me to start the blog, share the story and the tips with you and, now, talk about them in a podcast. So, that's how I made a mistake when I created my very first dashboard and if you haven't created any dashboards yet, I hope you are not going to make similar mistakes. Even if you are creating some of them, you could probably resonate with some of the ideas that I mentioned. So, go back and spend more time with your users and understand what it is that they really need in terms of information and then try to provide that information through your dashboards and reports.

If you are wondering that all this is good but what if you need more resources and don't know how to create the dashboards then how do you go about it? So, I've prepared a list of resources that can help you create awesome and powerful dashboards. The very first resource that I would recommend is a previous podcast episode **CP014** which was our podcast on how to make awesome dashboards. In that podcast, I have proposed a **10-step process for creating dashboards**. I suggest that you listen to that episode. In case you are listening to this podcast on your iPhone or iPad with the podcast tab, you can just scroll up or down and locate the 14th episode. It is called **CP014 : How to Make Awesome Dashboards**. Listen to that. If you are listening to this podcast on the <http://chandoo.org> website just head to <http://chandoo.org/session14> and that will take you to the 14th session podcast page where you can listen to the podcast and download it and access all the notes and resources mentioned in that episode. That's another podcast that will help you create awesome dashboards.

In terms of books, I would recommend **three different books for creating dashboards**. The first one is **Information Dashboard Design by Stephen Few**. This book does not talk a lot about the requirement analysis phase or anything but it talks about what happens after you know the requirements - going through the design stages of the dashboard, how you make sure that your dashboard looks good and clean and awesome - that's what this book talks about. Stephen shows you a lot of ugly and clumsy dashboard examples and then he tells you what to avoid and what to make sure of. He talks a lot about visualization theory and practical tips. He shows some really good examples. As I said, this is not an Excel book. It talks more about the design principles and ideas behind creating awesome, gorgeous looking dashboards. The book is Information Dashboard Design by Stephen Few. Again, you can find all the book names and resource links in the show notes for this podcast which is at <http://chandoo.org/session44>.

The second book that I recommend is **Non-Designer's Design Book by Robin Williams**. This book is a really simple book. All it talks about are the core and key principles when it comes to designing things. You could be designing visiting cards, you could be designing flyers, you could be designing your church newsletter, you could be designing your dashboard or you could be designing a certificate for your company employees or whatever. If you follow these very simple design principles that are outlined in the book, you are bound to produce something that looks consistent and good. The book is Non-



Designer's Design Book by Robin Williams. It is a very simple book and a short read; you can probably read it in a couple of hours. I keep this book handy because every now and then, I just go back and make sure that I am following the principles outlined in the book.

The third book that I recommend is an Excel book. This book will help you create the dashboards. I am going to be a bit selfish here - I am going to talk about my book which is **Dashboards for Excel**. This is a book by Jordan and me and it talks about how to create dashboards using Excel. So, we are going to discuss advanced formulas, VBA, advanced charting, pivot tables, Power Pivot, Power Query and Excel Data Model and all these awesome features that will help you create dashboards and reports using Excel. Not only do you get to create dashboards but you will also learn how to set up various other things like advanced charts and workbook models and VBA code and what not by reading the book. This book is releasing on September 15, 2015. It is available as a print book and I think the e-book will also be available on the same date or maybe one or two days later. I would recommend getting the print version because it is a technical book and usually reading such technical books with lots of images and illustrations and commentary can be very hard on a Kindle kind of platform. But, if you have the Kindle app on your iPad or your Android tablet you could probably read the book just the same because usually apps allow for color images and better readability for technical books whereas the Kindle paperweight is pretty lousy when it comes to reading technical books. The book is Dashboards for Excel and it is published by Apress and is releasing on 15th September. That's about books.

In terms of **resources**, I have two more ideas for you. One is the **Excel Dashboards page** on <http://chandoo.org>. This page provides tons of examples, resources, tutorials and more than 200 dashboard templates all available for freely downloading and learning at your own pace. So, go ahead and visit <http://chandoo.org>. On the top there is a menu bar; click on the Excel Dashboards link there. That will take you to our Excel Dashboards section where you can learn all about Excel Dashboards. Another resource that I would recommend is our **Excel School Dashboards program**. This online course teaches you all the necessary advanced Excel concepts like advanced formulas, conditional formatting, pivot tables and advanced and interactive charts along with 8 different tutorials on Excel Dashboards. They are full length tutorials that will show you how to create dashboards. There is a lesson that talks about the requirement analysis process that I just outlined in this podcast; that's also part of the Excel School Dashboards program. Excel School Dashboards program is highly rated by all our students. It is one of the best courses that you can get about Excel dashboards and it contains a whole bunch of information, highly valuable insights and templates and workbooks and practice examples and what not. It is a self-paced course and so you can go through the material at any time. Visit <http://chandoo.org/session44> for a link to the Excel School program page. This is a paid program. If you feel like joining, go ahead with it, and I am sure you will appreciate the investment because this course is going to help you create awesome dashboards.

That's all for now. I hope you enjoyed this podcast. I know the introduction was a bit long but I am very excited about the book. So, if you have been listening to <http://chandoo.org> podcast for a while and you



like our story, I request you to get a copy of the book so that you can also learn more and become awesome. Thank you so much. Stay awesome. Bye.