

DAILY WELLNESS FOR THE BUSINESS:

A CMA's FIELD NOTES ON AI-BUILT DASHBOARDS

Abstract

Daily performance dashboards driven by artificial intelligence (AI) can change organizations from annual audits to operational wellness on a daily basis. The article, based on a textile manufacturing engagement, demonstrates how three key indicators viz material cost variance, shift-wise productivity and product contribution margin, when monitored daily, helped shift a reactive cost function to a preventive one and revealed leakage of ₹6.6 crore per annum, which was hidden in monthly statements. Daily cost monitoring is the business version of preventive health care and a practical adoption path for practitioners. The lasting relevance of the accountant is to provide insights in time for action.

Prevention is better than Cure: The Philosophy behind this Article

People practice yoga, exercise and eat well because they are not sick, but to remain healthy. It is easier and cheaper to prevent than cure. The same logic is true in business, but most companies wait until they have a quarterly loss, covenant violation, or margin breakdown to take action rather than taking proactive steps to avoid these problems.

A real-time KPI dashboard is diagnostic equipment of this business doctor. Contribution margin per product is the cholesterol report. Working capital cycle is the blood pressure. Capacity utilisation is the pulse. Variance analysis is the blood test.



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Shift-wise productivity is the ECG revealing which chamber of the operation is underperforming.

When these readings are taken once a year during cost audit, the accountant is a coroner. When taken every day automatically, visually, with red-flag alerts, same professional becomes a wellness physician. This article describes how that transition was achieved for a textile client, with AI as an assistant. Although client's name mentioned here as "ABC Textile Mills" is fictional; but all calculations, prompts and iterations are drawn from real industry practice.

Why Just Three Vital Signs?

A physician checking daily wellness does not run forty tests but checks three basics i.e. pulse, blood pressure and a look at tongue. Three readings taken consistently every day are more useful than forty taken once a year.

Most cost dashboards fail because they track too much. Twenty Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) look impressive on Day 1 and become unmanageable by third week. When asked which three numbers he would want each morning, the CFO of the mill answered promptly:

- ⊙ **Material variance** “Am I buying right? Did anything spike yesterday?”
- ⊙ **Shift-wise productivity** “Are both shifts pulling their weight? Where’s the performance gap?”
- ⊙ **Product-wise contribution margin** “Am I selling right? Is anything quietly losing money?”

“Three questions, three vital signs, three minutes a day.”

These make up significant part of day-to-day manufacturing decisions and remaining can be reviewed monthly.

The Engagement: ABC Textile Mills

ABC Textile Mills is an integrated unit that performs spinning, weaving and processing activities under one roof. With four product lines, 600 workers and two eight-hour shifts, turnover of ₹180 crore. The Companies (Cost Records and Audit) Rules, 2014, Table B, requires cost audit. The CFO’s pain was: “They get their P&L on the 25th of the following month, by then, the damage is done.

The difference between a healthy and weak shift in a two-shift operation can be as much as 15 to 25% contribution. Gap is not reflected in consolidated monthly report due to averaging of the shifts. The treatment: One Excel dashboard opened each morning at 9 AM, refreshed in three minutes.

Working with AI: The Mentality That Changed Everything

The majority of practitioners fail to get AI right the first time. AI is more powerful when used as a collaborative assistant rather than as a conventional search engine. It is a **junior assistant**. The business problem should be explained just as done to articleship trainee, answer clarifying questions, correct course, iterate. After the third round, the output was what was desired in 20 minutes rather than 2 weeks. The difference was in four habits:

- ⊙ **Habit 1:** State the business problem, not the formula.
- ⊙ **Habit 2:** Share the names of the data structures, the columns and their types.
- ⊙ **Habit 3:** Ask for the logic, then the formula. Logical errors are detected before formula errors.
- ⊙ **Habit 4:** Test on a small sample, check by hand, deploy. Do not copy and paste an AI formula directly into the active workbook.

A representative discussion that aided in the creation of the dashboard is shown below:

Conversation 1: Designing the Wellness Dashboard

The first prompt was intentionally open-ended. I wanted to discuss the architecture with AI, not just give it formulas.

My prompt to AI:

Create cost wellness dashboard in Excel daily for an integrated textile mill for a turnover ₹180 crore, four product lines, two shifts. The CFO only wants 3 Vital Signs displayed on one screen: material variance, shift-wise productivity gap, contribution margin per product. Executive level design: naming from alerts panel who to call, large KPI cards, traffic-light flags, navy and gold theme. Daily data dump from ERP. Propose layout, red flag thresholds and action panel.

After two iterations the dashboard was finalised. It appears on the CFO’s screen each morning at 9 AM.

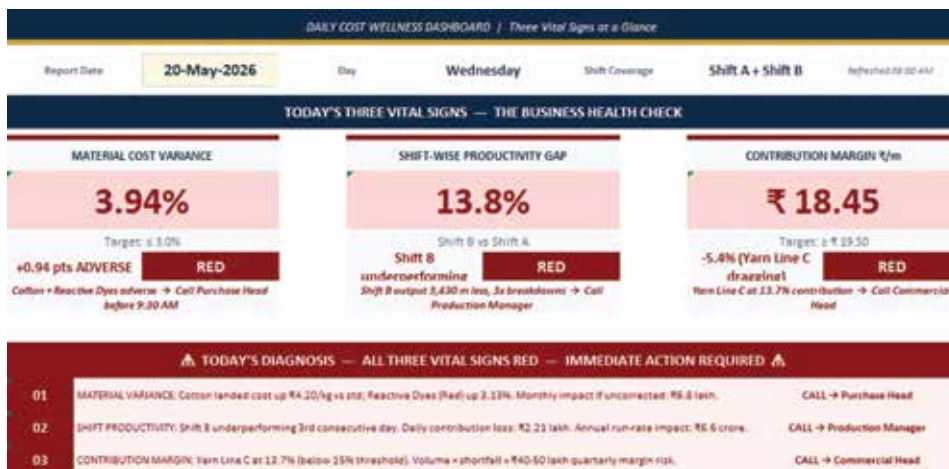


Figure 1 The Wellness Dashboard: three vital signs on one executive screen. Each KPI card has a colored top strip, a 32-point central value, a target, variance with a flag pill, one-line action instruction. The diagnosis panel identifies who to call.

Key design decisions: Navy banner conveys seriousness; every vital sign is on a full-width card with a 32-point central value visible from across the room; the action line under each card turns data into a phone call. The diagnosis panel measures the impact and identifies the owner. Variance without an owner is information without consequence.

Conversation 2: Diagnosing the Body Shift by Shift

The CFO's greatest weakness was shift-wise. The monthly totals of Averaging Shift A and Shift B mask the disease. This sheet is the ECG that shows each chamber individually.

My prompt to AI:

Create a production and cost analysis sheet that is shift based. Shift A runs 06:00–14:00, Shift B 14:00–22:00. Compare both on production output, achievement %, labour productivity (meters/hr), material wastage, scrap rate, machine downtime, loom breakdowns, power per metre, conversion cost per metre, direct wages per metre, quality defects. Flag each variance RED, AMBER or GREEN. End with a diagnosis panel translating data into specific actions and quantified financial impact.

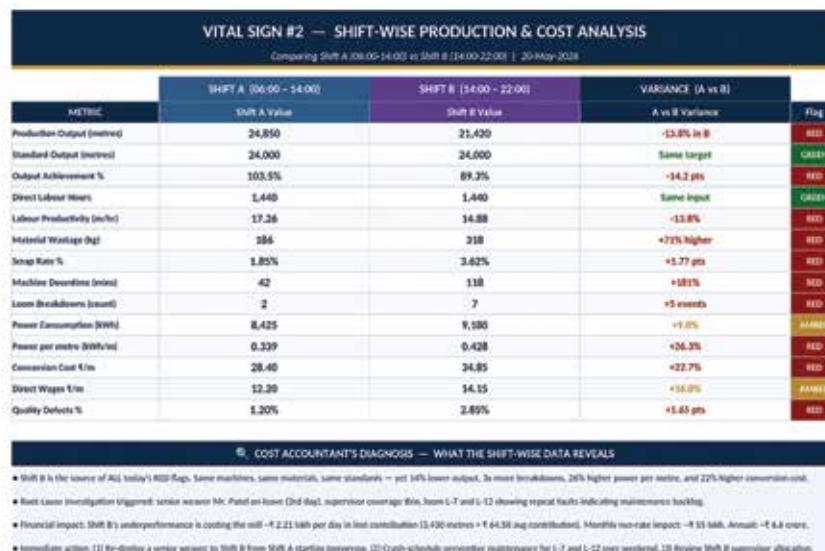


Figure 2: Shift-wise Production & Cost Analysis, the same machines, materials and standards are

used, but Shift B has 14% less production, 3 times more breakdowns, 26% more power per metre and 22% more conversion cost. This one sheet revealed a problem that monthly P&L had been hiding for 9 months.

Both shifts use the same machines, materials and aim for 24,000 metres. However, Shift B generated 3,430 metres less, lost 71% more material, experienced 181% more downtime, consumed 26% more power per metre and had 22.7% higher conversion cost. Impact: ₹2.21 lakh per day in lost contribution. Considering operational days, Annualized, ₹6.6 crore (based on operating days) 3.5% of turnover quietly leaking into the business while remaining hidden in the consolidated P&L.

The diagnosis panel converts these into three actions redeploy a senior weaver, crash-schedule maintenance for two looms, review Shift B supervisor allocation. In nine months of P&L reviews, no one had asked how the shifts performed

separately. The day this sheet went on the CFO's screen, a ₹6.6 crore annual leakage became visible. This is what the doctor sees that the coroner could not.

Conversation 3: The Material Variance Deep-Dive

Material cost cotton, dyes, chemicals is 55–65% of total cost. Daily monitoring wins half the battle.

My prompt to AI:

Build a Material Cost Variance deep-dive sheet. Top summary band: Standard Cost, Actual Cost, Adverse Variance in three large cards. Below, a table of twelve materials with Qty, Std Rate, Act Rate, Std Cost, Act Cost, Variance ₹, Variance %, a traffic-light flag (RED above 3%, AMBER 1.5–3%, GREEN below 1.5%). End with a diagnosis panel converting numbers into actions.

VITAL SIGN #1 — MATERIAL COST VARIANCE DEEP DIVE									
Date: 20-May-2026 Auto-calculated using SUMPRODUCT engine on daily ERP dump									
STANDARD COST ₹ 17,09,740			ACTUAL COST ₹ 17,37,083			ADVERSE VARIANCE ₹ 27,343 (+1.60%)			
S.No	Material	Qty (kg)	Std Rate	Act Rate	Std Cost ₹	Act Cost ₹	Variance ₹	Var %	Flag
1	Cotton (LRA Spinning)	2,830	220.00	224.20	627,000	636,970	11,970	1.91%	AMBER
2	Cotton (Carded)	1,920	195.00	198.50	374,400	381,120	6,720	1.79%	AMBER
3	Polyester Staple Fibre	1,450	145.00	144.80	210,250	209,960	(290)	-0.14%	GREEN
4	Reactive Dyes - Red	280	480.00	495.00	134,400	138,600	4,200	3.13%	RED
5	Reactive Dyes - Blue	215	550.00	512.00	119,250	110,080	(9,170)	-7.69%	GREEN
6	Vat Dyes - Indigo	195	720.00	738.00	140,400	142,910	2,510	1.79%	AMBER
7	Sizing Chemicals	540	85.00	84.20	45,900	45,468	(432)	-0.94%	GREEN
8	Caustic Soda	320	42.00	43.10	13,440	13,792	352	2.62%	AMBER
9	Soda Ash	410	38.00	38.20	15,580	15,662	82	0.53%	GREEN
10	Hydrogen Peroxide	285	52.00	53.40	14,820	15,219	399	2.69%	AMBER
11	Sodium Silicate	165	35.00	34.80	5,775	5,742	(33)	-0.57%	GREEN
12	Wetting Agents	145	125.00	128.00	18,125	18,560	435	2.40%	AMBER
TOTAL					1,709,740	1,737,083	27,343	1.60%	AMBER
COST ACCOUNTANT'S DIAGNOSIS									
- Cotton (LRA Spinning) — adverse rate variance of 1.91% (₹4.20/kg above standard). Root cause: spot market purchase due to short delivery from regular supplier. - Reactive Dyes (Red) — adverse 3.13%, crossing RED threshold. Verify supplier substitution by Purchase Dept; alert Quality team for any process impact downstream. - PIF, Soda Ash, Sodium Silicate — all GREEN. Bulk contracts holding well; preserve these supplier relationships. - Net daily adverse variance ₹27,343. At this pace, monthly impact ~₹8.1 lakh. Action recommended TODAY, not at month-end.									

Figure 3 Material Variance Deep-Dive: the three-card summary band quantifies the day's adverse variance at ₹27,343 (1.60%). Reactive Dyes (Red) crosses the RED threshold; the diagnosis panel names the supplier substitution and recommends today's action.

The summary band Standard, Actual, Adverse Variance is the most-glanced section. Three numbers in three seconds; the day's pain is clear. The detail table is the working paper; the summary band is for management. Two technical notes: the formula uses SUMPRODUCT (array-style multiplication in one formula); IFERROR prevents #DIV/0! on days without data, ensuring dashboard stability. Such minor technical refinements distinguish professional dashboard from basic spreadsheet.

Conversation 4: Finding the Hidden Margin Killer

A material variance is a sign of whether one is buying right or wrong. Shift productivity is a measure of whether one is producing right or not and product contribution indicates whether one is selling correctly or not.

My prompt to AI:

There are seven product lines. For each there

is monthly production in metres, weighted-average sales realization per metre and variable cost per metre. Construct a table with the following columns such as Contribution per metre, total contribution in rupees, contribution as a percentage to sales, flag (RED < 15%, AMBER 15–20%, GREEN > 20%), and an automatic rank based on total contribution. Create a bar graph with the title itself naming which line is “The silent margin killer”.

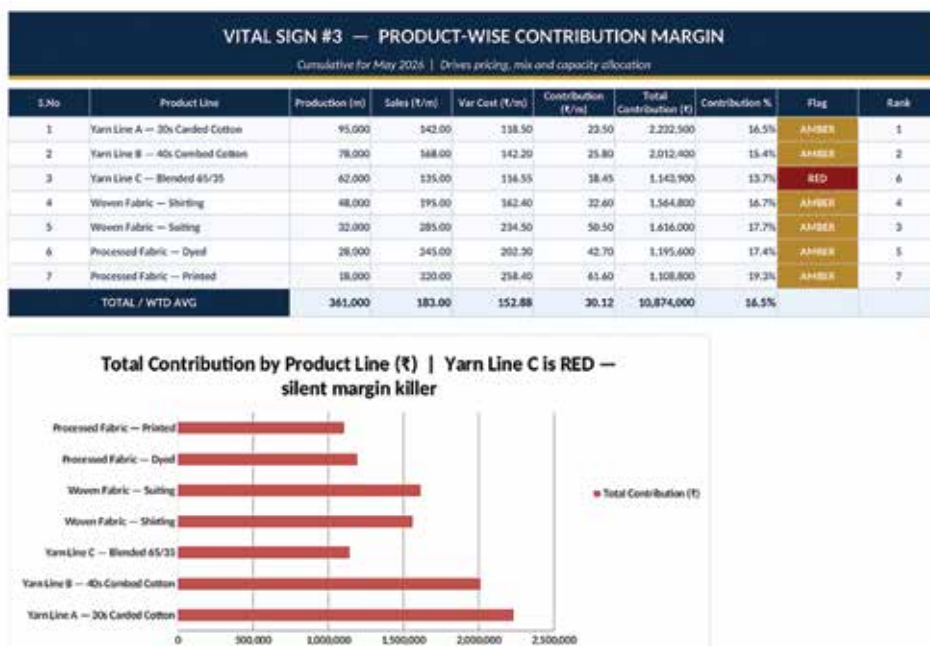


Figure 4 shows Product-wise Contribution Analysis with auto-generated chart. The only RED line 13.7% contribution is Yarn Line C against threshold 15%, which chart title itself flags it as silent margin killer.

Yarn Line C Blended 65/35 shows up RED at only 13.7% contribution. The bar length indicates to eye what the colour indicates to mind: Lines A and B are volume engines, but Line C is third largest by volume, but has weak contribution. The recommended management actions following this analysis are to investigate input mix, review strategies of pricing, fix the contribution or do capacity reallocation. Otherwise, the discussion would probably have waited for three months until quarterly P&L, when another ₹40–50 lakh of margin is lost.

The Daily Routine: Three Minutes from ERP to Decision

If it takes more than 3 minutes to update a

dashboard, then it's not useful. If it takes 30 minutes, no CFO will keep using it. The last step was to automatisation of daily refresh using Power Query so that the dashboard updates on one button click.

Have a glance at CFO's morning routine looked like after the above set-up:

- ⦿ 8:30 AM ERP team drops yesterday's CSV files into the shared folder.
- ⦿ 9:00 AM CFO opens the workbook, clicks Refresh All.
- ⦿ 9:01 AM All three vital signs are visible. The diagnosis panel names whom to call.
- ⦿ 9:03 AM Any RED alert triggers a phone call to the named owner before the 9:30 AM management huddle.

Three minutes checking three vital signs can build a proactive wellness routine instead of reactive cost process. None of these improvements require a new ERP, a data scientist or a six-figure consulting fee for consultants. All it took was One Excel workbook made with cost accounting know-how and created with an AI assistant's help.

Lessons for Every CMA:

Start small: Before rolling out dashboard to organization-wide, implement it in any one department or process.

Measure daily: Important KPI's such as inventory turnover, receivable collection period, payable cycle, production efficiency, cash conversion cycle should be tracked on a regular basis.

AI assists judgement: AI cannot replace managerial judgment but can be used to complement it by identifying patterns, forecasting trends and generating alerts.

Simplify dashboards: Include only the most relevant KPIs as a clean and simple dashboard helps to enhance decision making and user adoption.

Assign Ownership: Each KPI should be assigned ownership who shall be accountable for tracking as well as taking corrective action for the KPI when needed.

Regularly review and refine: The metrics on the dashboard should be updated regularly and AI models to reflect evolving business goals and market dynamics.

Implementation Guidance: Practical Steps for Initiation

If you are thinking about adopting, it is suggested that you take a step-by-step approach:

STEP 1: Select pilot with one mid-size manufacturer on two or more shifts, with management receptive to regular engagements.

STEP 2: Use only three KPIs as discussed above viz material variance, shift-wise productivity and contribution margin. Resist adding more.

STEP 3: Design for simplicity one ERP screen, one workbook, one button. Give it 3 months to get the habit in.

STEP 4: Start using AI from the beginning as a

junior assistant. State the problem clearly, find logic before formula, test on a sample, iterate.

STEP 5: Maintain confidentiality. Always use enterprise AI tools that have no training requirements; never upload client master data to free public tools. The ICMAI Code of Ethics is non-negotiable.

STEP 6: Dashboards are decision support tools and should be used in addition to, not instead of professional judgement and regular financial reporting.

Final Considerations: Professional Reflections

A coroner's job is to be accurate after the event. A doctor's job is to provide insight before the event. Now, with the technology of the present time, everyone can create the second.

Ongoing monitoring of business activities is crucial to protect the interests of stakeholders, including employees, shareholders, financial institutions. One of the most powerful tools that professionals have today to provide that care is the daily wellness dashboard, which is based on three Vital Signs and has AI as its tireless assistant. The future CMA will not be remembered for producing reports, it will be remembered for preventing problems from appearing on those reports. 

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