



Enterprise Information Portals: The Next Fad or the Next Logical Step?

Are Enterprise Information Portals the true successor to the Corporate Intranet?

Let's start with the basics - What is an Enterprise Information Portal?

An Enterprise Information Portal (EIP) is basically a comprehensive solution based on web technologies that integrates an organization's systems and applications into a single user-definable solution. This solution acts as a "gateway" for most users' information, transaction and system security needs. Most, not all users, is an important distinction: there will always be the need for "power users" of application software (such as heavy finance software users) and for these kinds of users there is no substitute for the traditional business model of client/server software. But the 80/20 rule applies--80% of your users will need only 20% of the software's functionality. That's where an EIP comes in.

Can you imagine all your organization's databases; knowledge bases; collaboration tools; department, workgroup, and project-specific intranets; application software and security systems brought together into one cohesive solution that can be accessed online from a low-cost browser interface? Enterprise Information Portals -- conforming to the organization's brand and creating a standard user interface -- deliver just such a vision: large amounts of disparate, relevant transactions, applications and content presented simply and cheaply to users on demand. It's a compelling model.

This sounds like a Utopian ideal, but how does an Enterprise Information Portal differ from a well-developed intranet? **The answer can be summed up in two words: functionality and personalization.** EIPs allow users to customize their portal environment to deliver only the transactions and information they need to do their job. This means every user who logs onto the portal will have a different view of the system (actually - in practice users are normally grouped together into like-minded groups or clusters for management purposes but the fact remains that each individual user can have a totally different experience). For example, a Sales Manager probably won't need to see revisions of the project GAANT charts but would like to receive news on the latest sales leads generated by marketing and the summary of conversions from his team. He or she will also, inevitably, want to update information not just read it and here's where the portal scores over the one-way traffic experienced by so many intranet users: *with a portal you can interact with the underlying databases and*

applications. Portals can also greatly reduce the amount of duplication of input by capturing transaction information once and updating the underlying databases with the relevant pieces of that transaction. This eliminates waste, speeds up cycle times and reduces input errors.

Enterprise Information Portals are developed specifically to work within business environments, often integrating standard software tools such as e-mail, shared calendars, discussion forums, and online meetings, etc. into the final solution alongside the transactional capability of the ERP systems, CRM systems and Finance systems and enhancing functionality. This not only eases software rollout and maintenance but also reduces total cost of ownership because you're dealing with one portal solution rather than several separate software tools. Since portal software integrates various key components, you don't have to negotiate multiple licensing agreements and support contracts.

Is an Enterprise Information Portal Right For You?

How do you decide whether an Enterprise Information Portal will work in your organization? The answer lies in your understanding of three key influencing factors:

1) Your users

Portals work best in large and diverse user communities where individual transaction and application needs vary from user to user. If the majority of your users have very similar needs, a client sever solution with web access through, say Citrix or Terminal Services, would probably be sufficient. If there is significant employee turnover or if the vast majority of users are contractors and temp workers a portal solution can greatly aid adoption and uptake of your systems. The fact that it can be customized and that user defined help can be inbuilt short-circuits the training necessary with more complex client/server implementations. Your users don't need to be terribly computer savvy either; the beauty of portals is that they should be self-explanatory.

2) Your transactions, applications, and processes

Portals are best suited to applications that need to be accessed by a large user-base on a regular basis and who need to update the transactions contained in them in a controlled way, not to the occasional and casual browsing user. They are particularly effective when dealing with widely dispersed users who need to log in from remote locations such as traveling sales/service/project teams or home-workers. A crucial area where they deliver real ROI is when there are a host of underlying applications that have common "touch-point" i.e. where certain data is common to all of them but needs to be input to each separately. In this scenario, the portal solution can deliver huge operational benefits by unifying these applications into one common interface.

3) The state of your current infrastructure

If you're considering moving to an Enterprise Information Portal, you need to determine whether the move will bear significant business advantages taking into account the cost of the software, the effort required for implementation/integration, and training for users and system managers. It's easy to justify such an investment when the conditions described above are prevalent but less so when there is a single ERP solution...but even then it can be done. One of our major international clients used iport to open up their ERP systems so that a) a far greater number of users could gain access and b) to make the data easier and more transparent so that management effort could be focused on the real pressure points. Many ERP systems

are organized, after all, to suit the ERP system...not necessarily to suit your business!

So - are Enterprise Information Portals really just the latest fad or are they the next logical step in the evolution of the intranet? We believe they are that next logical step; we believe that EIPs will increasingly replace intranets as a more flexible and practical solutions that can accomplish far more challenging organizational goals for different user needs. Most of the early intranet solutions became nothing more than electronic notice boards containing only the most basic and bland content: go on admit it...how many have you seen that are like that? The true Enterprise Information Portal is much more - - deployed correctly it forms the hub of business operations for 80% of your users. That makes it a killer line of business application and one that demands your full attention.

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