The Bluegem Portal

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INTRODUCTION

"Portal technologies" in recent times have become a catchphrase within information technology circles. The concept of the "portal" (more commonly termed *Internet portal*), has initially been used to refer to Web sites, which presented the user with the ability to access rich content, resources, and services on the World Wide Web (Kakumanu & Mezzacca, 2005; Smith, 2004; White, 2000). As such, the Internet portal provides its users with a one-stop entry point to the resources of the World Wide Web.

The term "portal" originally derives from the Latin word *portale*, which is defined as "city gate" (Zhou, 2003, p. 120). Thus, similar to the *portale* providing access to the services and resources of a city, Internet portal technologies provide a point of access to information and services to the users of the Internet.

The concept of the Internet portal has since been applied within the business environment with an increasing number of organisations adopting this "gateway-to-the-world" approach (Wilder, Davis, & Dalton, 1999, p. 18). Corporate portals are implemented for the benefit of an organisation in order to integrate the data-based components of the business and to streamline employee access to organisational information (Millman, 1998).

This article examines the concept of the corporate portal and discusses their features and usage within organisations. Using the example of a portal in use within an organisation, this article will explore and illustrate the principles behind the corporate portal, and predict the future trends within organisational portal development. This article concludes with a call for future research within the field of portal technologies.

BACKGROUND

Corporate portals provide a single access-point to organisationally relevant data and documents (Aneja, Rowan, & Brooksby, 2000; Auditore, 2001; Watson & Fenner, 2000), combining data from disparate data stores and information systems (Raol, Koong, Lui, & Yu, 2002; Watson et al., 2000; Wilder et al., 1999), in order to facilitate the sharing, access, and distribution of this business information throughout the organisational environment (Aneja et al., 2000; Auditore, 2001; Shilakes & Tylman, 1998). This therefore, provides employees with a universal point of access to the organisation's knowledge base.

In this way, Corporate portals can be utilised in order to reduce inefficiencies within the workplace because of the need to use differing sets of data (and their related technologies) in order to complete a single work-task (Raol et al., 2002; Rose, 2003; Watson et al., 2000). By providing one point for employees to access all data at their fingertips, staff can quickly and easily locate required information, without the need to request aid (Kakumanu et al., 2005); thus, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisational workforce. As such, the corporate portal presents itself as a knowledge-aggregator, providing access to required organisational resources from one single and consolidated point.

The following section illustrates the corporate portal concept with the use of the Bluegem Portal. The Bluegem Portal will be utilised as an example to describe the features of a typical corporate portal, and to also acknowledge future trends within these portal technologies.

THE BLUEGEM PORTAL

Bluegem Software Solutions is a successful Western Australian software development company. Founded in 1996, Bluegem specialises in providing Web-enabled technical solutions including business applications, knowledge management, and learning systems. Bluegem is a relatively small organisation, however they too have recognised the benefits of easily and quickly disseminating business information and documents between all members of the organisation.

Bluegem began the development of their corporate portal in 2002 with the implementation of their company intranet. This organisational intranet has since grown to encompass features including document management functionalities, electronic team collaboration for development documentation, and universal access to organisational documents by all members of the software development team. The availability of search functionalities for the contents of the portal demonstrates that the Bluegem portal exhibits the most commonly cited functions of the corporate portal.

The features of a corporate portal are cited as including access to information, ability to collaborate and cooperate on document creation, content management, and search functionalities (Kakumanu et al., 2005; Kim, Chaudhury, &

Rao, 2002; Raol et al., 2002; Watson et al., 2000). Each of these features is consistent with the typically implemented information-oriented approach in the development of portals. These portals are concerned primarily with the accessibility of data, reduction of information overload, and related knowledge management procedures (Kim et al., 2002). These corporate portals subscribe to the information-aggregation rationale of organisational portals, whereby the emphasis is on the access of diverse information from a single centralised point.

In the case of Bluegem, their corporate portal allowed for company documents to be made more accessible by their employees. Developers could access and append design and development documents concurrently with their work-tasks. At the same time, other employees could access the same range of documents for their own work tasks. As such, Bluegem's workflow processes have become more streamlined as the relevant data and information have become more accessible to the people who need it most.

Since its inception, the corporate portal concept has begun to evolve toward a more tool- and activity-oriented approach, whereby the emphasis of the corporate portal is geared toward the work-task; whereby the portal technology supports the entire work-process by providing the user with the required data, as well as the tools and applications to complete their work entirely within the portal itself (Nielson, 2003, 2005). These tool- and activity-oriented portals utilise integrated applications in order to provide the tools required to complete the user's tasks. These integrated applications have been noted as a potential future aspect in the evolution of the portal. Corporate portals will now be tool- and activity-based, whereby the portal plays more than the role of a simple information aggregator but also allows the completion of business activities without leaving the corporate portal to do so (Aneja et al., 2000; Kakumanu et al., 2005; Raol et al., 2002; Shilakes et al., 1998; Smith, 2004; Wilder et al., 1999).

The Bluegem Portal provides an example of one such portal. As well as providing access to vital business information, the Bluegem Portal is also employed to support the day-to-day business activities of the organisation itself. Bluegem utilises a range of self-developed integrated and Web-enabled applications, which exist within the Bluegem Portal in order to complete these tasks. The greatest functionality of the Bluegem portal is provided by these applications. Utilising the portal, employees can manage clients and personal contacts, perform customer relations activities, and facilitate project scheduling and business monitoring activities. Each of these business applications is accessible by Bluegem's employees, providing them with valuable information in relation to their software development activities. Using the Bluegem Portal, project managers can enter and access client contact information, enter and access the details of a project, and then schedule and plan the new project in terms of cost, time, and the resources involved. Staff members can then utilise the portal to enter their daily timesheet records and to invoice clients for the work they have performed. Furthermore, the data collected in relation to each of the project activities can be used to monitor work-projects, ensuring that all tasks are performed on cost, and on time.

The Bluegem portal thus, provides employees with access to information, documents, and the ability to perform their business activities from anywhere, and at anytime. The Bluegem Portal has become a "virtual office" (Auditore, 2001) allowing for a single universal access point to the data, documents, and the daily business processes of the organisation, from any point on the globe. This virtual office allows Bluegem's employees to work from the office, from home, or from the office of one of Bluegem's clients. An employee can access the Bluegem portal and immediately locate company contacts, track the progress of development projects, and enter time sheeting and invoicing information into the system. Furthermore, development documentation as well as company documents are also available at their fingertips. As such, the Bluegem portal has since become a significant resource to Bluegem software solutions' business environment.

FUTURE TRENDS

The trend for organisations to adopt corporate portals is overwhelming. However, while the literature suggests that corporate portals should be used to deploy business applications (Aneja et al., 2000; Kakumanu et al., 2005; Raol et al., 2002; Shilakes et al., 1998; Smith, 2004; Wilder et al., 1999), there is very little literature describing the actual implementation of these functions within corporate portals.

However, there are predictions of a growing trend toward corporate portals becoming an access point for applications (Andrews et al., 2005; Plummer, Valdes, & Phifer, 2005; Smith, 2004), as well as for the data and documents, as they are utilized to provide access to currently. The integration of applications into corporate portals will become more prevalent in the near future (Pezzini, 2003; Reents & Schulte, 1998; Valdes & Phifer, 2003) as the concept of the corporate portal progresses from being of "pure information aggregator" to also becoming application coordinators (Nielson, 2005). Corporate portals are predicted to move from an information-oriented regime, to one which is more tool- and activity-oriented in approach. This change in the focus of the corporate portal is likely to further increase their popularity in the long term as organisational portals become more useful to all information workers.

The concept of a portal providing access to applications is not a new one, however, the research related to the

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