Portals Then and Now: Development and Use of Portals in Australia and Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the evolution of two different types of Web portals, one in Bangladesh and the other in Australia. The initial data collection was conducted in the early 2000s and revisited in 2009. The idea of a Web portal is not new, but in the last few years the portal concept has gained considerably in importance as new types of portal are developed and new uses found for portal technology. The article begins with a brief classification of the types of portals in use today and then considers some of the advantages conferred on a business in using portal technology. Developed and developing countries have different problems in making use of e-commerce and see the advantages and problems of using portals rather differently. In the article the authors examine and compare case studies of a Horizontal B-B Industry Portal in Melbourne, Australia, and a Vertical Industry Portal in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Keywords: B-B Transactions, Horizontal Industry Portal, Payment Gateway, SME, Vertical Industry Portal

THE USE OF PORTALS IN BUSINESS

Unrelated to computers or the Internet, the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Oxford University Press, 1964) describes a portal as a doorway or a gateway. A gateway is further described as being the means of entrance or exit, or the frame or structure built over the entrance. The word ‘portal’ has thus been around for quite some time, but its use to describe a tool for electronic commerce has emerged only comparatively recently.

A simple definition of a portal sees it as a special Web (or intranet) site designed to act as a gateway to give convenient access to other related sites (Davison, Burgess, & Tatnall 2008). More specific definitions of portals will sometimes show them as sites that offer personalised content to the user (Pearson 2001) or that offer a broad range of services rather than necessarily redirecting users elsewhere (Zikmund & d’Amico 2001). Some portals offer a range of services including trading facilities as banks look to partner them (Internet.com 1999).

This article examines several different types of portals used by small to medium sized enterprises (SME), and compares and contrasts

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the development and evolution over several years of two: one in a developed country –
Australia, and the other in a developing country – Bangladesh. In both instances, data was drawn
from interviews conducted with stakeholders concerned with operation of the portal.

Types of Portals

There is no definitive categorisation of the types of portal, but Davison et. al. (2008) offers the following list: General Portals, Vertical Industry Portals, Horizontal Industry Portals, Community Portals, Enterprise Information Portals, e-Marketplace Portals, Personal/Mobile Portals, Information Portals and Niche Portals. Unfortunately as the categories are not mutually exclusive some portals fit into more than one category while others do not fit well into any of these categories. To further complicate any attempt at categorisation, some implementations can span several different portal-types blended into some form of hybrid solution. In this article we use examples of two of these: Horizontal Industry Portals and Vertical Industry Portals, so we will now briefly discuss each of these types.

Horizontal Industry Portals

Portals can be described as horizontal when they are utilised by a broad base of users across a horizontal market (Lynch, 1998) and horizontal industry portals are typically based around a group of industries or a local area. One Australian example was the Bizewest B-B portal (Tatnall & Burgess, 2002; Burgess, Bingley, & Tatnall, 2005; Burgess & Tatnall, 2007; Tatnall, 2007; Tatnall & Pliaaskin, 2007), which was designed to enable small and medium enterprises in Melbourne’s western suburbs to engage in e-commerce transactions with each other.

Vertical Industry Portals

These are usually based around specific industry areas and are designed to serve the needs of these industries (Chowdhury, Burgess, & Tatnall, 2003). They aim to aggregate information relevant to specific groups or online trading communities of closely related industries to facilitate the exchange of goods and services in a particular market as part of a value chain. Vertical industry portals often specialise in business commodities and materials, services or particular interest areas.

Benefits of Portals to SMEs

The use of portals can provide a number of benefits for businesses of all types, and particularly for SMEs. Some of these advantages are: (Chowdhury et al., 2003; Tatnall, Burgess, & Singh, 2004):

• **A Secure Environment**: Portals can provide a secure online environment to SMEs to enable them to set up cyber businesses. Portals of this type often have a payment infrastructure that enables SMEs to integrate their accounts receivable and payable to the portal backend systems.

• **Search and Directory Services**: Search engines that list the portals can automatically enable Web users to find the gateway to small online shops on the Web via these portals, saving substantially on costs.

• **New Partnerships**: E-commerce opens up the opportunity for businesses to sell to new buyers, tap into the ‘cyber’ supply chain and win new business, offer complementary products with other businesses, and procure goods electronically.

• **Community Building and Regional Relationships**: Community building features such as chat rooms, message boards, instant-messaging services, online greeting cards and other Web services are sometimes included in the portal infrastructure.

• **Strategy, Management and Business Trust**: Portals can enable businesses to uptake a common structure for e-business that helps them to attain the management support or share ideas with others businesses and attain success.
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