Chapter XII

Portals Unlock the Knowledge that Drives Business Value

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, Robert Duffner, director of product marketing at BEA Systems, defines the landscape and technologies for enterprise portals. Beginning with the business drivers that led to the historical creation of the product category, the article goes on to describe the three generations of portal product evolution from simple packaged applications to robust portal platforms. Duffner describes a five-tier framework that defines the technical underpinnings of the ideal portal platform and provides a vision for how the technology will evolve over time.

For the past 30 years, enterprise computing has pursued the goal of information systems that can respond to the ever-increasing pace of business change and the concomitant need for increased information and access. From the requirements planning (MRP) systems of the 1970s, to the enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems of the ‘80s, to customer relationship management (CRM) in the ‘90s, each new technology was hailed as the answer to enterprise information access. While these systems offered new functionality and promised higher levels of access and
visibility, their value was effectively limited by the need to integrate the new
technology with legacy systems and infrastructure.

Throughout the 1990s, new technologies emerged to meet this need for integration: data warehousing, client-server computing, enterprise application integration, information search and retrieval. All these offered the promise of “unlocking” the potential of enterprise information resources and business intelligence. These technologies, in their turn, presented their own limitations, most notably their reliance on proprietary methods of integration. Not only was the cost of maintaining this custom-built integration high, these tenuously linked islands of automation lacked the flexibility to meet the emerging challenges of conducting business over the Web.

At the end of the 1990s, enterprise portals made their debut, combining many of the features of earlier integration technologies. Portals presented new opportunities to extend existing applications as well as a mechanism to quickly deploy new Web-based applications. The first-wave portals were primarily packaged applications, each with a specific focus—for example, benefits enrollment—and a narrow view. These portals typically delivered application services to the organization’s different constituencies; employees could look up benefits information, students had access to course and registration information, suppliers could view open requests for proposals.

As portals proliferated within organizations, extending from department to department, managing these development and implementation projects became increasingly complex. While the portal provided benefits to single departments such as human resources, sales and engineering—the complexity of these solutions snowballed by gradually adding layers of software and independent integration points to be managed by the central IT department. These separate portals evolved from access points into an application deployment framework in and of themselves. They became prey to many of the same integration problems as the earlier applications they were intended to solve.

Today, organizations in businesses of every type are rushing into the development and deployment of portals—a veritable California Gold Rush. The benefits of portal software are widely understood: portals make an organization more accessible to its customers and partners, and offer a way to create identity and competitive advantage through personalized interaction. Industry analysts have often cited the following as benefits that flow from effective portal implementations:

- Reduced costs and investments
- Accelerated business processes and elimination of steps
- Increased sales
- Higher competitive barriers
- Reduced training costs
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