

Evolution of Portals

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INTRODUCTION

The word *portal* came from the Latin word *porta*, which is translated to *gate*. Anything that acts as a gateway to anything else is a portal. The portal server acts as gateway to the enterprise in a network. However, there are many different definitions of the word portal. A search of the word using Google search engine yields many thousands of references. Some consider portal to be a new name for a Web site. A portal is an entry point to the World Wide Web (WWW) and therefore, more than what a Web site does. According to Internet 101 <<http://WWW.internet101.org>>, a portal is a Web site linking to another Web site. Sometimes search engines have been referred to as portals. Access companies, such as Microsoft Network (MSN) and America On-Line (AOL), have often been referred to as portals. Although the definition of the word portal is still evolving, the definition we will use is a gateway, and a Web portal can thus be seen as a gateway to the information and services on the Web, more specifically to services on both the public Internet and on corporate intranets. This article aims to take the historical approach based on the development of the Web and examine the factors that have contributed to the evolution of portals. The origin of portals came about because of the need for information organisation. Users need to be provided with coherent and understandable information.

ADVANTAGES OF PORTALS

There are many benefits that portals offer to business and enterprise. These include improved decision making, improved communication, increased productivity, and support integration. A major challenge in portal development is to broaden business thinking and shifting from IT-centric development to business-centric thinking (Ramos, 2004).

A modern business environment is complex and expensive, which has motivated many companies to invest in enterprise portals as a mechanism by which they can manage their information in a cohesive and structured fashion. Portals offer many advantages over other software applications. They provide a single point of access for employees, partners, and customers to various types of (structured and unstructured)

information, making an important contribution to enabling enterprise knowledge management. Intranet portals also provide business intelligence and collaborative tools. They promise to create significant and sustainable competitive advantages for early adopters

HISTORY

Davydov (2001) charts the progression of portals along four key interrelated paths.

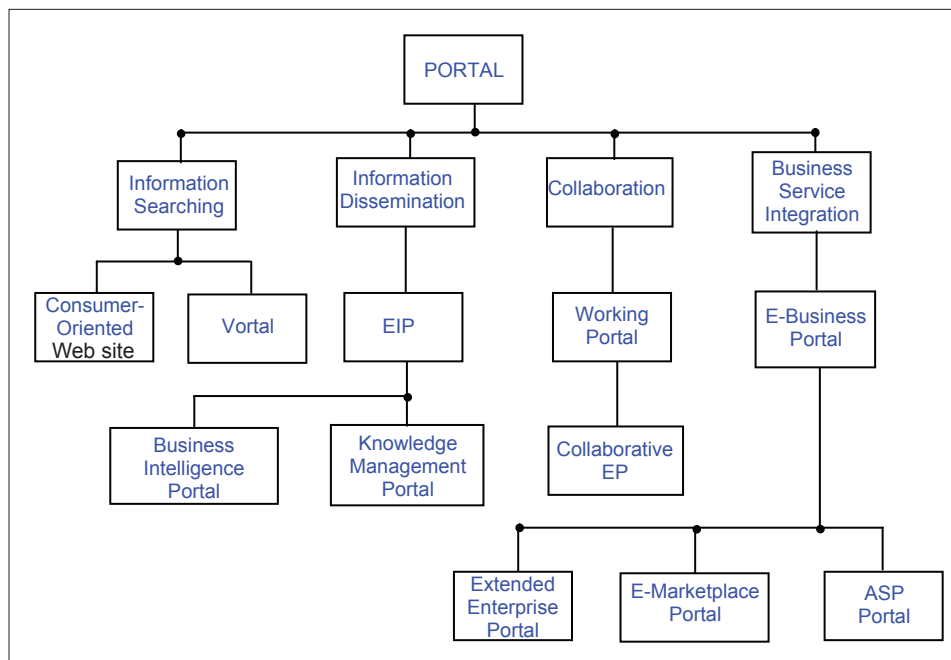
Information Searching

A Web portal requires good search engine technology to attract users because up to 50% of users' time in using the Internet is spent searching for information. Two types of portal have evolved for searching: consumer-oriented search sites and vortals. A vortal is a Web site that provides a gateway to information related to a particular industry or group of people sharing an interest in buying, selling, or exchanging information about that particular industry. Examples of a vortal portal are Medcast and WebMD of the medical communities, for the speedy broadcast of ground-breaking medical news and services to help with disease treatment, patient concerns, and practice management.

Information Dissemination

Today, businesses require the coordination of multiple data sources, processes, and people, and the sharing of information among them. To achieve this effectively requires some type of business intelligence or knowledge management applications to synthesise the data. This requirement has led to the development of corporate portals, the enterprise portal (also known as the enterprise information portal or EIP). The main aim of the corporate portal is to expose and deliver business-specific relevant information in the context of helping employees to be productive and competitive. This requires employees to have the ability to communicate with others using the obtained information. This interaction is especially important for today's knowledge workers. Corporate portals can be designed for different usages: internally or

Figure 1. The evolution of portals



externally. Although different in usage, corporate portals are very similar with regard to information dissemination. The key characteristics can be grouped into two categories:

1. Identification and categorisation of corporate information resources, and production and delivery of relevant context.
2. Knowledge-driven information processing.

Despite the growth of corporate portals, it is still difficult to formalise a comprehensive successful corporate model for portals. In order to meet business’s needs, it is clear the corporate portals have to evolve into more specialised portals. This brings us to the next phase of portal evolution.

Collaboration (Bringing People Together)

A workspace portal, known as enterprise collaborative portal (ECP) or collaborative EIP, is a corporate portal that connects users not only with information, but also everyone who they need. It consolidates a wide range of collaborative and office applications, such as e-mail, groupware, workflow, and critical desktop, under the same gateway as information searching, access, and content production applications. The aim of the collaborative portal is to enable users to work jointly with others in a task or project.

Collaborative features in EIP include discussion groups, feedback gathering on activities of visitors, chat rooms for support groups, bulletin board, mailing list, and so forth. This requires not only information sharing, but also decision sharing. The integration of the decision-making process is one of the main requirements for EAI technologies embedded into corporate portals.

Business Service Integration

The integration of business services across the supply chain has become more important in EIPs than information (content) dissemination within an enterprise. This is due to the increased emphasis on e-business and the support for online transactions. Corporate portals are nowadays embracing e-business requirements. A new type of B2B corporate portal is emerging. This new class of corporate portals not only provide content, but also have utility of services for developing, deploying, and managing e-business applications. Corporate portals are evolving along the following three categories:

- Extended enterprise portal (EEP)
- E-marketplace portal (e-Mp)
- ASP portal (ASP)

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