Setting Up and Developing an Educational Portal

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, an ever-increasing number of portals have been appearing on the Web. However, there is still precious little systematic knowledge about how the creation process works and how maintenance and development of a portal should be conducted once the implementation phase is complete.

The scope of this article is to detail the stages of creation of an institutional portal in the education sector in Brazil, as well as to present the activities involved in monitoring and developing this portal.

The organization under scrutiny is a traditional administration school in Brazil, namely the Brazilian School of Public and Business Administration of the Getulio Vargas Foundation—EBAPE/FGV. It was the first school of administration in Latin America. Created in 1952, in the early years, the school efforts addressed the public administration area. In the 90s, the school's activities were expanded by the launch of business programs. Nowadays, EBAPE offers a PhD program, masters, continuing education programs, an undergraduate course, and technical assistance services.

In the case of EBAPE, the overriding motives behind the development of the portal were: (i) the need to be adequately represented on the Web; (ii) the opportunity to promote its courses; and (iii) the desire to develop a better communication channel with its stakeholders. In other words, the portal was essentially developed in order to be a communication tool for the school.

The development of the portal took five months and involved a multidisciplinary team. The following stages of development are described in the article: (i) elaboration of the business plan, (ii) decision on proposed content, (iii) preliminary navigation structure proposal, (iv) appraisal and consolidation of content and reorganization of the navigation structure, (v) design proposal, (vi) programming, and (vii) launch of the portal.

Since updating and development procedures are essential after the implementation of a portal, these will also be discussed in the article.

In essence, this article presents a systemic overview of the stages involved in the construction, maintenance, and development of portals. By achieving this objective, the article reveals research opportunities in the areas of instruction and development of portals to the academic community.

BACKGROUND

There are many objectives that a company may seek in creating a portal. One of the primary objectives a company might have when creating a portal is, for example, to facilitate business transactions between the client and the company (Seybold & Marchak, 2001). Irrespective of whether or not the company works with electronic trade, the client can use the Internet to obtain information about products or services (Gulati & Garino, 2000; Huizingh, 2002).

Companies can use their portals to provide their clients with an almost unlimited quantity of information, offer tools with which clients can access and interpret such information, and lastly, monitor the information search processes of clients (Hanson, 2001).

Despite the fact that a vast number of companies are launching portals on the Web, the process of creation and development of a portal is hardly still the subject of any debate. Literature on the subject presents methods for performance evaluation of portals—mainly for electronic commerce portals, but very little is discussed on topics relating to the processes involved in the creation of a portal and how its maintenance and development should be handled.

It is generally accepted that a portal should contain plenty of content, be graphically pleasing, and offer benefits to its users. In fact, the greater the quality and the accuracy of information, the more valuable the portal becomes as a resource to its consumers--the more useful the content, the greater the credibility of the promotions of the company (Ang, 2001; Reedy, Schullo, & Zimmerman, 2001).

Upon making a vast quantity of information available, it is necessary to carefully plan the manner in which this content is to be presented. When planning the navigation structure of a portal, efficiency should be the main con-

sideration. The user should not be required to make many clicks in order to obtain the information required. Among other factors, the interest and involvement of the public is a direct result of the ease with which information sought is located (Lazar, 2005).

Adequate navigation is necessary to hold the user's interest (Reedy et al., 2001). Good navigability makes the information search and comparison process a pleasant experience that generates trust and satisfaction (Turban, 2002).

Information can be accessed and presented in various ways on the Web including text, images, and sound (Turban, 2002). It is necessary to draw the attention of the consumer with an easy-to-use portal, as well as one that is fun and quick. Pages on the Web should be personalized, all encompassing, highly visual, and easy to navigate. Maintaining the portal consistently and aesthetically pleasing helps the consumer to navigate more easily. The portal should hold the customer's attention, curiosity, and interest in the product on offer and its benefits. Consumer attention can be captured using graphics and a well-structured content of high aggregate value (Reedy et al., 2001).

The visual appeal can offer a stimulating experience, which can influence competition in the Internet market. Any imprecision in the maintenance of a consistent visual identity can result in the impression of a lack of care and attention to detail that may reduce the level of consumer trust in the company (Melewar & Abhijit, 2002). The organization should also conduct an evaluation of the visual identities of its competitors, duly monitoring the presentation of information in other sectors (Schmitt, 2001).

When planning the design of a portal, it is also important to consider the time required to download its pages. The speed with which a page is loaded influences the quantity of pages accessed, the duration of the visit, and the image of the company. Consequently, when constructing a portal, the integration between design and programming is of paramount importance.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE INTERNET PORTAL

Characteristics of the Project Developed

As mentioned earlier, this article describes the processes involved in the implementation and development of the Internet portal of EBAPE/FGV. The institution wished to develop enhanced communication with its stakeholders by means of this portal.

Stages in the Implementation of the Portal

The stages involved in the development of the portal under analysis are described next.

Elaboration of the Business Plan

The initiative for the creation of the portal had the backing of the Board of Director of the school, and a professor from the area of information management was appointed project coordinator.

The first step involved the elaboration of a business plan jointly by the Board of Director and the project coordinator, which aligned the objectives of the portal to the school's strategy, outlining what the project intended to achieve. The business plan was also drawn up in order to assess the viability of the project and establish if the budget of the school could cover the costs of the portal. The technological, financial, and personnel resources required for development and maintenance of the portal were then calculated. The opportunities arising from implementation of the portal and the motivations behind the project were presented. The initial ideas of what the portal was hoping to set out to achieve were accurately defined and a flow-chart for development was drawn up.

The elaboration of a business plan for an academic portal is not a usual step. However, the business plan was essential to ensure that the Board of Director of the school could obtain financial and political support from the President of the Getulio Vargas Foundation by outlining the relevance and viability of the project.

Once the business plan had been drawn up, the team required to develop the project was formed. A marketing and design professional was hired to oversee elaboration of the content, navigation structure, and layout. A team of five information technology professionals was appointed for programming of the pages.

Decision on Proposed Content

Elaboration of the content of the portal in question was based on the guidelines set out in the business plan.

The person responsible for content and navigation conducted a benchmarking exercise against other portals. A list of portals to be visited was drawn up, be they competitors or otherwise. The following portals were visited: ones well known in the sector; some portals listed in search engines; and portals indicated by the overall project coordinator.

During comparative analysis of the selected portals, the type of information and services available, and how this information was presented in terms of navigation structure and graphic interface, was duly examined and recorded.

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