

Chapter 4.24

The Demise of a Business-to-Business Portal

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the development and ultimate demise of the Bizewest portal in the Western Region of Melbourne, Australia. We argue that no matter how good the portal software, the final success or failure of the portal is primarily related to how well it is adopted and used. We begin by discussing the concept and benefits of Web portals, and especially those that are applicable to SMEs, as the Bizewest portal was primarily aimed at SMEs. We describe how the portal was conceived and developed, and the difficulty that its proponents had in persuading regional SMEs to change their business processes to make best use of online trading with each other. The research was socio-technical in nature, and was based on considering this innovation through the lens of innovation translation, informed by actor-network theory. Although Bizewest has ceased operations,

the portal project must be considered a success, as it produced substantial benefits.

INTRODUCTION

After receiving a government grant under an e-commerce “early movers” scheme, the Western Region Economic Development Organisation in Melbourne, Australia, conceived and developed a business-to-business portal for use by Small to Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the region. This innovative project was to create a horizontal portal, Bizewest, which would enable the whole range of small to medium enterprises in Melbourne’s western region to engage in an increased number of business-to-business e-commerce transactions with each other (Tatnall & Pliaskin, 2005).

This chapter does not describe the Bizewest portal software technology to any degree, but

rather investigates the adoption (or perhaps non-adoption) of this technology by SMEs in Melbourne's western region. In regard to technological innovation, we argue that it does not matter how good the technology is if no one makes use of it. If the intended users do not adopt the portal, then it will fail. The chapter investigates reasons for non-adoption of the Bizewest portal and outlines the lessons that might be learned from this. Management decisions to implement new technology, in this case, a business-to-business portal, must take account of the likely adoption and use of this technology, and take necessary steps to ensure that it is adopted and used to full advantage; otherwise, time and money will be wasted.

Web Portals

The term "Web Portal" is rather overused and quite difficult to define precisely, taking on a somewhat different meaning depending on the viewpoint of the stakeholder (Tatnall, 2005). In general terms, unrelated to the World Wide Web, the Macquarie Dictionary defines a portal as "a door, gate, or entrance" (Macquarie Library, 1981). More specifically, a Web portal can be seen as a special Internet (or intranet) site designed to act *primarily* as a *gateway* to give access to other sites containing information or services. An important notion behind the concept of a portal is that it does not provide much content itself, but rather organises content from other providers. Other more restrictive technical definitions of portals are used by some scholars, but we prefer the broader definition that simply equates a portal to a gateway. While some aspects of the Bizewest portal, the subject of this chapter, could be described just as Web pages, as the primary purpose of Bizewest was to provide a gateway to information and services that might be useful to the SMEs, we will describe it as a *portal*.

There is no definitive categorisation of the various types of portal, but Davison, Burgess, and Tatnall (2004) offer the following:

- **General portals:** These portals try to be the "one-stop shops" for all (or at least many) user needs. Many of these have developed from being simple search tools such as Yahoo (<http://au.yahoo.com/>), Internet service providers such as AOL (www.aol.com.au/), or e-mail services like Hotmail – NineMSN (<http://ninemsn.com.au/>). Many general portals include services such as: free e-mail, links to search engines and categories of information, membership services, news and sports, business headlines and articles, personalised space with a user's selections, links to chat rooms, links to virtual shopping malls, and Web directories.
- **Regional or community portals** are often set up by community groups in locations such as Canada (webdesign.foundlocally.com/OurPortals.htm) or Launceston in Tasmania (www.elaunceston.com/), or are sometimes set up by people with special or common interests, or based around special interest groups such as older people (www.greypath.com) (Tatnall & Lepa, 2001).
- **Vertical industry portals** are usually tightly focused around specific industry areas, and so tend to be more specialised, offering their services in one particular interest or industry area (Burgess, Bingley, & Tatnall, 2005; Lynch, 1998). Examples of vertical industry portals include the timber industry (<http://www.timber.org>) and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer Exporter Association (www.bangladeshgarments.info). Many vertical portals have services for business partners or "members" only.
- **Horizontal industry portals** are based around a group of businesses in an industry or

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