



From portal to software integration heaven

Organisations are building portals but are they being overcautious?

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The portals market is showing signs of opening up.

Several large organisations are in the market for a corporate software portal and others are adding functionality to existing systems as the technology improves and underlying applications are integrated.

Computerworld was keen to see if the obvious interest at a portals conference in March had translated into action. The crowd of about 100 included IT executives from educational institutions as well as those of banks, government agencies and other large organisations.

Portals, which are often closely tied in with other initiatives such as content management, document management, collaboration, workflow and e-commerce applications, typically begin life as an access layer that gives users a degree of personalisation and authenticated entry to enterprise applications and services. From there they often develop into access points for business partners and, sometimes, retail customers. "B2E [employees], B2B, B2C tends to be the progression," says Mike Rhodes, worldwide head of IBM's WebSphere portal unit.

Westpac is preparing the ground for an employee portal; BNZ New Zealand staff gained access to an HR and applications portal created by parent bank NAB in 2001. They will initially be able to use modules from the company's SAP suite, and over 100 applications in time.

The Ministry of Health, though not yet talking publicly on the matter, is busy with a number of portal initiatives in line with its priorities out of the WAVE report. The Department of Conservation is signing off on version 3 of its somewhat customisable employee portal, DOCnet, and planning remote editing and access to new applications.

Auckland entertainment and conference organisation The Edge recently completed a large software project that comprised a portal, CRM and document management. The University of Waikato is at the start of a two-year project that will build a portal that targets individuals – particularly staff and students – "with which it has a relationship". Auckland University, whose portal is now over a year old, is understood to be building into it more functionality from its underlying PeopleSoft suite. The university didn't respond to several phone calls, but *Computerworld* understands that while the portal currently allows users to run applications such as email from outside the university, access to other applications, such as financials, is planned for the next 18 months or so.

All the universities offer remote access to some degree, and those from AUT and Massey can be personalised to some degree. The University of Canterbury will keep adding to its information pages, says deputy IT services head Robin Harrington, but is not planning a university-wide portal.

What they're doing

Westpac, like many large organisations not keen to divulge exactly what it's up to, is taking a staged approach to offering staff personalised access to services and information.

Spokesman Paul Gregory says the New Zealand operation of the Australian-owned bank "is working on developing the intranet into portal frameworks enabling more personalised/tailored access for each staff member to services via the intranet".

Gregory says the first phase of this will happen in the next financial year, "with ensuing phases implemented in an evolutionary way throughout subsequent financial years, across all intranets, rather than as one specific large project". Gregory wouldn't disclose whether the development was being done inhouse or by consultants, or whether dedicated portal technology would be bought for the task.

Waikato University already has a couple of portal initiatives under way but is now at the "start of a the voyage" to implement a university-wide portal. Waikato is looking at flowing its integrated applications and processes like content management through to a portal, says ITS director Derek Postlewaight. Its desire for transactional online relationships with the outside world call for security such as authentication and personalisation. A specialist portal application is "more likely", he says, and any software chosen will have to integrate with existing systems such as Jade, Oracle and Endeavor. The university is creating the portal business case based on expectations of improved service and efficiency.

The Edge , which unites the Aotea Centre, The Auckland Town Hall and The Civic, last year began its largest ever software project, to create a 80-user portal, Edge Net, which would become the chief knowledge repository for the organisation.

Auckland-based Crossware helped The Edge build an IBM Lotus Domino-based portal to provide access to IBM-created contact and document management apps, in the process moving the organisation away from its Microsoft-centric IT base. Cutting duplication in its business processing communications – it handles five customer databases from five distinct business areas -- and easing access were key aims.

The capital project was funded directly by the Auckland City Council.

This appears to only be the start of a new round of projects that are likely to involve portals. IDC New Zealand 2002 research confirms highest growth expectations in education, health and government, and mostly in 500-plus user organisations. Gartner's Steve Bittinger says the enterprise portal server share race includes five contestants – IBM in the lead with SAP, BEA, Plumtree and Sun. It expects in the next two years more consolidation of vendors and offerings of what it calls application platform suites – e-business platform software that includes portal and application servers and integration brokers.

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