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Companies have long looked for ways to increase the amount and quality of information flow to improve employee performance. Certain technologies have enabled that flow, including intranets and portals. But the concept of workspace portals takes the idea of an interface one step further – that is, using workspace portals to bring about workforce transformation. Here, Peter Cheese and William Ives explain the possibilities and give you a concrete plan for how to derive value from portals and improve employee decision-making.

REALIZING THE PROMISE OF PORTALS

Transforming the way employees work and collaborate

William Ives and Peter Cheese, Accenture

Portals provide the opportunity to reverse our traditional relationship with computers. Instead of needing to figure out how to find things within them, the portal, with its personalization and focused aggregation of content and applications, is an initial step toward turning the tables and having computers proactively work to address our needs. In addition, the dawn of effective support for collaboration found in many portals allows us to reach and interact with the right people to make further sense of information the portal supplies. This help is coming just in time as the continuing explosion of information in our business world threatens to overwhelm us at the same time as effective use of knowledge is increasingly seen as the most powerful driver of business success.

With numerous analysts reporting that organizations lose billions searching for the right information, businesses around the world are starting to recognize the potential value that portals can bring. The Meta group recently projected that 85 percent of Global 2000 companies will have implemented portals by 2004. However, portals can be confusing as they come in all shapes and sizes, and serve a variety of functions and audiences. In fact, the portal “buzz,” which focuses on portals as the latest trend in IT, may be doing more harm than good. What’s getting lost in these messages is the fact that portals are simply doorways that, by themselves, do little to drive business performance.

To deliver value, portals must be focused on

specific business outcomes. They cannot simply be costly upgrades of the intranet. The real value of portals – and the real challenge of implementing them correctly – lies just beyond the doorway. After all, a doorway is only valuable if it leads you to where you want to go – or, in the case of portals, to the content and applications needed to satisfy your business objectives. Portals can offer the information, knowledge, experts and applications employees need to perform their jobs more effectively. Transforming workforce performance through effective design and implementation of portals is the focus of this article.

Deriving value from portals

But first, we’ll take a step back and examine several possible ways to derive value from portals. Business-to-business portals, for example, allow companies to interact more efficiently with their external partners and suppliers. These types of portals can, among other things, dramatically improve organization-wide processes (such as supply chain management) and create virtual marketplaces for business-to-business commerce. Business-to-consumer portals provide a new channel of communication between businesses and customers and increase the potential for true customer self-service.

Business-to-employee portals can, on one hand, provide a company’s workers with direct self-service access to the compensation, benefits and other information formerly only available in costly personal



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KEYPOINTS

interactions. But they can go further by offering the information, knowledge, experts and applications employees need to perform their jobs more effectively. While this workforce-transformation portal has an employee focus as its core, it can link to customers and suppliers to fulfill its mission. For example, a business-to-consumer portal could collect customer insights to better target these new products and get responses to new product ideas.

For portals to transform workforce performance, they must be integrated into your business processes. And they must provide access to the right types of information, resources, tools, experts and applications that drive business success. This sounds simple, but we have seen many portal implementations that fail to focus on this business alignment, making the same mistake as other IT initiatives. A number of portal vendors are building business cases around infrastructure savings. While that may have some use, the workspace portal builds its business case on support for specific business functions, such as increasing sales or lowering the cost of customer service. Even when recognized, this business alignment isn't always easy to achieve since implementing portals exposes many organizational issues and usually requires major shifts in the way business is done.

Changing the way we work

We use the term workspace portal to refer to portals that focus on workforce transformation. This useful concept was first coined by Ovum: a workspace portal integrates, in a single and personalized interface, all the resources employees require to optimize performance. The workspace portal frequently involves the integration of knowledge management with such enterprise applications as CRM and ERP (Enterprise Resource Planning, a single software platform for all departments and functions across an organization) and includes such integrated resources as:

- enterprise data and applications;
- personal productivity tools;
- documented knowledge;
- access to experts and collaboration tools.

We use the term workforce transformation to refer to significant performance improvements, whether these are in existing processes or engaging in new processes and behavior. To achieve these quantum leaps in performance, workspace portals align to processes and roles in specific industries, enabling employees to more effectively view what they need, understand how to enhance decisions and then act through integrated applications. These capabilities – view, understand and act – have traditionally been

- Portals can be used to derive value from business-to-business, business-to-consumer and business-to-employee relationships.
- To transform workforce performance, portals must be integrated into your organization's business processes.
- Workspace portals allow the capabilities of “view, understand and act” to be seamlessly connected. Traditionally, ERP and KM systems only address one or two of those capabilities.
- Workspace portals allow employees to share information, knowledge and ideas.
- To build an effective workspace portal, you must plan, enable, govern, motivate, perform and measure.
- Don't install a portal first, then look for business issues to resolve. Plan upfront and realize the complexities involved in implementation and maintenance.

disconnected, if even present.

The fact that workspace portals bring together two worlds of structured data and knowledge sharing or collaboration marks a significant improvement over previous attempts to transform performance that acted in isolation. ERP and legacy applications addressed the “view” and “act,” while KM systems that were disconnected from the action didn't offer the “understand” component at the right time or in the right context.

In addition, viewing an organization's disparate data sources through ERP systems did little to help users develop the insights necessary to boost their own performance. In other words, ERP in the past provided a static snapshot of where a company has been. It didn't offer an explanation of how the company got there, nor where it needed to go. For this, companies have always relied – whether they acknowledge it or not – on the collaboration of peers and experts, and on the ongoing blend of content and expert thinking in a shared context. But there was no way for the individual employee to access this shared thinking, even when it existed.

The workspace portal attempts to overcome these shortcomings caused by disconnected solutions and links the three components of view, understand and act for all employees in the enterprise. Since workspace portals are process-based vehicles that align to particular business functions and goals, they

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How can workspace portals help your company?

- Provide automated identification and distribution of content
- Create an integrated desktop environment from isolated programs
- Provide personalized interfaces for all employees based on their roles in the organization
- Serve as the point of delivery for aggregated services
- Integrate advanced collaboration capabilities
- Create and expose “actual” taxonomy of information in an organization
- Help break down organizational silos
- Provide a shared area where ideas can be exchanged and discussed
- Allow employees to access more applications, enabling them to gather more data and knowledge to increase context before making decisions

- tend to work best at the intersection of functionality and industry. They help break down the organizational silos that have traditionally prevented groups such as sales, product development and CRM from collaborating and accessing enterprise-wide information. Instead, by using a common architecture, taxonomy and interface, workspace portals provide a shared area where ideas can be exchanged and discussed.

Workspace portal solutions not only allow more employees to access specific applications, they also allow each employee to access more applications. That is, while portals provide employees with the traditional tools and assets needed to drive individual performance within their business functions, they also enable greater access to applications that extend across the enterprise and provide a broader context for their decisions. These applications are integrated behind-the-scenes, which means the worker does not need to learn how to navigate multiple data systems or wade through irrelevant detail to find what they need. All of the information the workers need is presented in the context of making a business decision or serving a client. Most importantly, workspace portals allow employees – within and across functional areas – to share information, knowledge and ideas.

Integrating with the customer

Figure 1, below, shows one view of a sample workspace portal for a call center. In this case the CRM application is embedded within the portal to provide a context-based understanding of how to best handle each customer. This occurs through documented best practices and access to an expert in the form of a “virtual floorwalker.”

Prior to this, while reps had access to best-practice guidelines, as well as an actual expert who walked the

floors of the call center, this help was disconnected from the CRM application and often not available at the point of need with the customer on the phone. This integration can take many forms. For example, in this case, individual performance is measured – those with high scores are encouraged to contribute best practices while those with low scores are directed to targeted e-learning modules to close performance gaps. Others can access the portal to provide better guidance for their decisions, whether they're learning specialists looking to gauge results of programs and what to build next, business managers trying to understand results of promotions and how to adjust them to better reach clients, or human resource specialists assessing the effects of shifts in performance-based compensation. The performance of individuals, groups, and initiatives becomes transparent to all who need to know.

Building an effective workspace portal

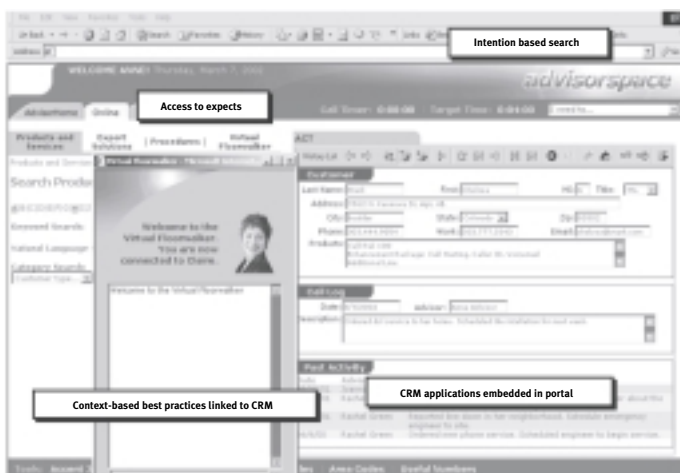
Because the portal's presentation layer is most seen, it often receives the most attention. This is a fundamental mistake as it's only the iceberg's tip – the real effort and value lies beneath. Below, we offer a framework for implementing portals. The components that lie beneath the presentation layer can be loosely aligned to the following areas: plan, enable, govern, motivate, perform and measure. Each needs to be properly addressed to achieve success. See Figure 2, page 23, to see how they work together.

Plan to achieve strategic alignment. Business leaders must be heavily involved in the portal's implementation. While workspace portals may eventually extend to all areas of an enterprise, CEOs must be able to determine those areas that will benefit most from early implementation, stop rogue projects and reallocate portal funding appropriately. In many cases, benefits achieved by early successes help fund the continued rollout. Above all, leaders must be able to chart an evolving implementation that best serves the enterprise as a whole.

Enable through consistent and proper use of technology. The enterprise portal architecture must provide broad access to common components – the taxonomy, infrastructure and functions, such as communications and employee self-services. An organization's enterprise portal architecture should enable the horizontal reach and the technical context, which allows current (and future) applications to communicate with one another and enables users to achieve cross-organizational understanding.

Unfortunately, many companies – particularly those that allow individual groups to establish their own portals – overlook this requirement for a consistent architecture. Instead, they rely on multiple vendors to establish multiple portals for multiple workforces.

Figure 1: Sample workspace portal for a call center



When this occurs, users from one portal group are unable to use others or even if successful, they typically face an unfamiliar interface. Workspace portals should instead be built on a single enterprise system to provide easy-to-use and consistent, but customized, interfaces for each business function. When a company's portals are thus "federated" (as opposed to independent), users can quickly and easily switch from one portal to another.

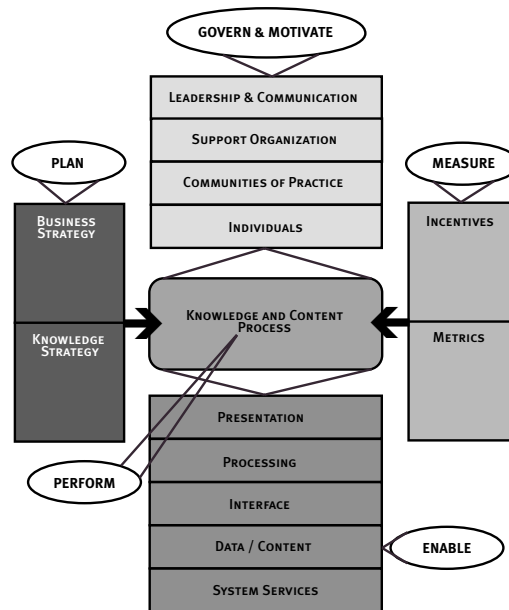
Perform through consistent content architecture and processes. While the content within portals for different functions may vary, the processes for accessing and contributing should remain constant. The underlying taxonomy should also strive for consistency to facilitate the enterprise-wide sharing of knowledge. These features are essential for the portal to achieve its silo-breaking potential.

Governance to ensure compliance and efficiency. Governance is frequently overlooked as it often falls to IT because many consider portals to be an extension of enterprise application integration. However, to achieve business value there must be a centralized focus and organization-wide compliance on content and technical standards. It's up to the organization's leadership to ensure compliance. This can be particularly challenging for organizations that have already created portals for specific groups. In these cases, old portals should be dismantled and aligned to the new content and technical architectures.

Motivate to ensure usage. Workspace portals deliver more than new resources. They also deliver a new way of working. One of the more difficult aspects of implementing a portal solution is ensuring that the organization is ready for the new demands brought about by improved information access and collaboration. Typically, this requires a fundamental mind-shift. Earlier efforts to improve business performance attempted to gain compliance through learning and communication initiatives – that is, by re-engineering processes and then training the workforce to use them or devising new strategies and then working to get employee buy-in. Workspace portals are allowing organizations to shift some of the compliance burden to the computer. The workspace portal is designed to meet individual needs in a way that also meets enterprise requirements. If the portal is designed to support strategic business requirements and this is effectively communicated, more than half of the compliance battle is won.

Measure to determine results and improvement targets. Portals offer many opportunities for measurement. Implementations need to align these measurements with the targeted business goals and continuously use them to refine individual and organizational performance, as well as upgrade portal functionality.

Figure 2: Framework for implementing portals



Where do we go from here?

Although it's relatively new, the portal market has witnessed several transformations. The first portal products were content-centric, focused on helping organizations manage their information. Second-generation portals added an application framework, collaboration tools and wireless functionality. Now, emerging third-generation portals are trying to create a unifying platform that will link an organization's various internal and external portal initiatives and its content and processes.

Because portals have received such positive press, it's tempting for businesses to jump into the portal fray without fully understanding how a portal can help solve a particular business problem. This could lead to disastrous results. According to Gartner, more than 20 percent of portal implementations will fail to meet their business goals in 2002. Two reasons for these failures occur when businesses install their portals first, then look for business issues to resolve, or when they are unprepared for the behind-the-scenes complexity involved in implementing and maintaining a successful portal.



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