

How Many Systems Needs a Man ...

How many systems must a car salesman access? How many interfaces does a bank employee need for managing his work? Which information is relevant for the Supply Chain Manager of a pharmaceutical company and from which sources does it come? How much time does a customer service person spend to answer routine questions about product availability, orders and the whereabouts of a shipment?

These questions illustrate a problem in today's IT-centric business world, but they also demonstrate a significant potential for improvement of companies' internal and collaborative processes. Portals claim to address this issue by offering a single access point to all information and services its users need to perform their work effectively and efficiently. Customers, suppliers, or employees should be supported in their processes, routine and non-value-added work eliminated, thus increasing time for core activities and value creation. Taking the user's perspective, the portal serves as information and service integrator.

Enterprise Portals and Customer Processes

Nowadays, the term portal is often used to describe consumer oriented Internet sites that offer a set of services and content, such as news, free e-mail, and product offerings such as Yahoo. At the same time, the definition also includes industry-specific sites aiming at supporting B2B interactions and we can conclude that there is no clear distinction between portals, exchanges, and marketplaces.

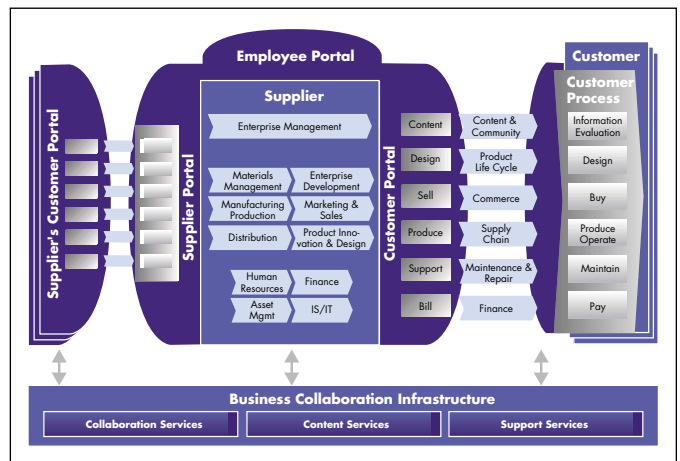
From the customer's perspective, however, this discussion is irrelevant and of purely academic interest. A portal is supposed to deliver useful information and value added services to enable and support processes, nothing more and nothing less.

Ideally, a company runs one single portal – the Enterprise Portal. In the early days of Internet technology, many companies developed a variety of web-enabled solutions, each with its own user interface, data model and business

logic, partially accessing and manipulating the same back-end systems or making data redundant. This variety of systems resulted in excessive costs for support and maintenance.

Today, many companies have embarked on efforts to integrate and unify access to their information and services by means of enterprise portal technology. Over the past years, a large variety of products and tools, such as Tibco, Plumtree and Broadvision have emerged and also ERP vendors, such as SAP, has set for a portal solution offering simple integration and unified access to ERP modules and other applications.

At the core of the information and services a portal offers lies the customer process that defines the information and service needs of users and provides the basis for a process based role model. Through additional features, such as single login, and the common interface and navigation, the user has access to all relevant applications and information sources that are tied to his role and person, from e-mail, business intelligence and stock exchange rates, to sales figures, warehouse availability of products and logistics information.



The Importance of Portals for IMG Clients

Many of our clients have experienced a need for restructuring their IT landscape, making applications, services and information available to customers, suppliers, partners and employees. As our projects demonstrate, enterprise portals can realize substantial cost savings and performance improvements. Collaborative processes within a company's business network can be made more transparent and efficient and companies can use their support of customer processes by superior services as a com-

petitive differentiator. The same holds true for suppliers and partners, e.g. in collaborative product development. These forms of collaboration in business networks have been known for several years under names as Efficient Customer Response (ECR) and Supplier-Retailer Collaboration (SRC), but are now reinforced by today's technological capabilities.

Improving collaborative processes also requires reconsidering company-internal processes with regard to effectiveness and efficiency. Bringing together applications and information that is logically dispersed across multiple systems can reduce time and costs and improve quality of work.

IMG and Portals

Considering enterprise portals a major enabler for internal and collaborative process improvement, IMG has invested substantially in skills development in the portal field. As a result, IMG has been able to gather practical experience in the portal field and has been involved in a large variety of conceptual and implementation projects for a number of companies in different industries. Today, IMG can provide clients with a holistic portal offering, ranging from process analysis and design to implementation and related integration of ERP and backend systems. All phases of a project have a sound methodical foundation in PROMET®. The following Short Paper, summarizes the experiences of IMG's Enterprise Portal unit from a variety of projects in multiple industries.

It is based on the White Paper «Enterprise Portals», that has been compiled by the members of IMG's Portal-Builders Practice.

Enterprise Portals – Added Value through Integration

The more complex a company is, the more critical the integration of enterprise services through information systems becomes. An enterprise is only able to operate efficiently and successfully, if its services, processes, and systems work in harmony. But integration is not an end in itself, so that the added value has to be demonstrated for every project.

An integration-concept has to take several elements into account that are – to a different extent – relevant for every organization:

- Portals: The integration of services from the company's service system;
- Enterprise Application Integration (EAI): The integration of systems;

- B2B-Integration: The integration of partners within the business network;
- B2E-Integration: The integration of employees into the business network.

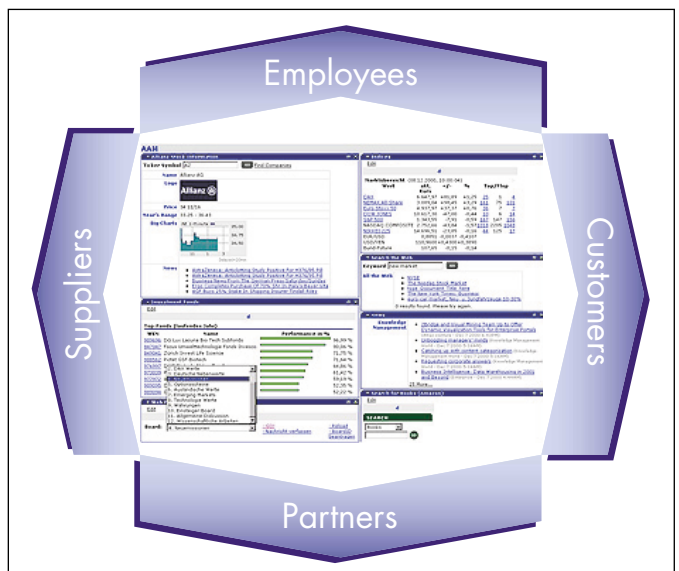
Portals

Without any doubt, the term “portal” is currently one of the most popular catchwords in the IT world, even though no general definition exists. In general, a portal has the goal of providing optimal support to the processes that a user's needs generate, by providing all necessary services, i.e. all necessary information and functions.

We consider enterprise portals to be the general term from which employee portals, consumer portals, supplier portals, etc. with their particular characteristics can be developed.

Portals support customer processes. These customer processes have to be served using various technologies and distribution channels. Customer processes are not isolated individual problems but complex processes: a consumer, who – for example – wants to get from A to B, does not merely want to buy an airplane ticket – but wants all needs regarding the trip to be taken care of. This means that he or she needs to know, how to get from the point of origin to the airport and how to get to the final destination from the arrival airport; he/she wants to know what happens in case of a change of carrier during the trip – and last but not least, whether it may be more advantageous to take the train instead of an airplane.

These are questions that an operator of a portal concentrating on mobility has to answer. Consequently, the task of this portal operator consists of integrating the different services – including external services – around the subject mobility within the process portal.

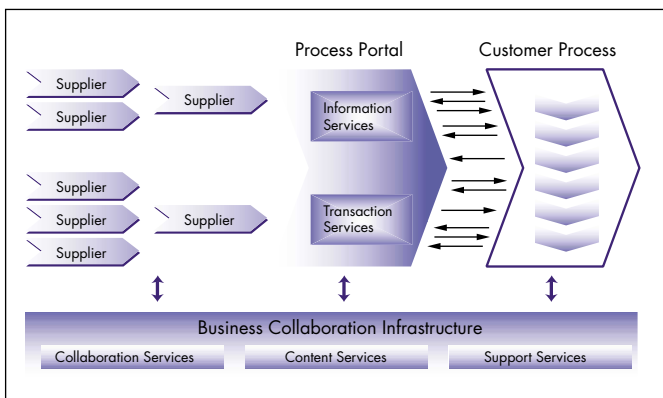


Within an employee portal, an employee's process may consist of organizing an internal event – e.g. a training workshop or a conference. For this purpose, all means have to be made available to the employee that are necessary for completing this process: such as a checklist for selecting the appropriate location, aids for soliciting offers, confirmations, bookings, etc.

In order to be able to analyze and record the customer process in a meaningful way, it is important to know the roles of the users, i.e. to develop a "role model". Various roles exist within an enterprise. Each of these roles has certain processes attached to it. A portal should recognize and reflect the processes related to all occurring roles.

A process portal focuses different services – mainly information services and transaction services – for a customer. A transaction service initiates actual transactions: ticket booking, inventory checking, ERP system entries, etc.; information services, on the other hand, are comprised of soft data such as news, weather information, and directory services.

A portal's added value results from a meaningful combination of information and transaction services: a bank's consumer portal should, for example, inform the customer not only about the current economic and market events. It is equally insufficient to enable a customer of this portal to only set up and manage a portfolio. Only when the customer is immediately able to react with the portfolio to economic information, will he/she find the desired added value in this portal.



Enterprise Application Integration

An integration concept is necessary in order to be able to integrate different services. This task is fulfilled by "Enterprise Application Integration" (EAI), which links the different systems within an enterprise. Its goal is to make business processes available on a modular basis.

The central idea behind the EAI approach is to reflect and support the flow of information across different systems as simple and transparent as possible. For this purpose,

EAI tools use a standardized layer between the different systems – a kind of intelligent middleware – that encapsulates the interfaces accordingly. Using this abstraction layer, it is possible to simply dock new systems to this layer and accordingly retrieve information from these systems easily.

EAI tools generally use an integration bus. The general idea behind a bus solution is to retrieve data from a system, transport it across a standardized format, and eventually make it available to a different system, without the necessity to fully understand or reflect the systems' business logic.

Even though Enterprise Application Integration on the basis of an integration bus causes higher initial expenses compared to merely programming an interface between two systems, it has the medium-term advantage that it is significantly more flexible and cost-effective.

B2B-Integration

It often turns out that an enterprise cannot or does not want to offer the services needed for a portal on its own. Companies have long cooperated with different partners and have set up joint collaborative processes with other companies that integrate various external partners or suppliers. This kind of B2B-integration is nothing but an expansion of the EAI idea across company boundaries – towards intercompany processes.

Usually, no predetermined uniform standard is available in these cases, unlike during a company-internal integration. The primary issue consists of creating integration solutions that integrate the different standards. In case of a B2B-integration, much more general standards are typically employed. At the same time, the integration must be structured much more openly and flexibly – and can obviously not have the depth of a company-internal integration of different applications.

The Information Management Group (IMG) und Integration Projects

IMG accompanies integration projects from the initial idea to the complete implementation. IMG is able to document actual project experience in all three integration areas. Early in 2000, the "The Portal Builders" lead practice was established within the service line Enterprise Portals in order to serve integration projects in a client-oriented way. In doing so, IMG follows a best-of-breed approach to implement projects jointly with the client and employs the PROMET® methods suite. Benefits are demonstrated by using return-on-investment measures.

The Information Management Group has successfully planned and completed various portal and integration projects. Among its clients in this area are Allianz Asset Management, astrium, BMW, Statoil, and numerous other companies, such as Bayer AG.

In order to provide clients with a quick overview of the potential of integration projects, IMG has developed so-called Quick-Scan packages: the subject areas EAI and B2B-integration are covered by the Quick-Scan package "Service Integration"; in addition, a Quick-Scan package "Portals" is available. Both packages provide a quick analysis of the achievable.

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