Portals enhance access to information – but where is the information?

Portals came onto the scene around 1999. Since then, discussions about the advantages of this important software innovation invariably mentioned improved information access as one of its main assets – either via customized access to selected information sources or through the improvements brought about by content management applications. As motivation why a company should embark on investigating the possibilities of what seems to be an expensive venture, it was argued that portals would streamline an organization's information and content management endeavours, as well as provide functionalities that customize and personalize information flow to the employees of an organization. As early as 2000, Brian Detlor (2000:91) wrote that 'corporate portals are single-point Web browser interfaces used within organizations to promote the gathering, sharing and dissemination of information throughout the enterprise'. Though his definition is very general and has been updated by about every other article on portals, including distinguishing between different levels of portals, Detlor's definition strongly emphasized the information (or content) element of a portal. Note that he did not specify which type of information applies to the definition.

To take the argument one step further, let us study the conclusions Karen Bannan made with regard to two scenarios that she set up in a recent issue of *EContent* (2002:17):

John Q (employee) gets to work in the morning. He switches his computer on and starts browsing for information. He hits CNN.com, Yahoo! and the Web sites of trade publications that he regularly reads. Then he checks his e-mail, searches Business Wire for the latest news about the competition and retrieves the company's opening bell stock quote. He finishes up on the company's intranet, looking at his vacation day accrual and reading a message from the company's chief operating officer. Time expended: 60 minutes.

Across town, Jane Q (employee) sits down at her desk, turns on her computer and pulls up her company's corporate portal. She checks all of the same resources and several others, such as an internal message board, a company calendar, a news clipping service and the latest information gleaned from business intelligence tools. Time expended: 15 minutes.

The first comment of Bannan (2002) is indicative of the current literature discussing the advantages of portals: 'There is more information available than ever.... Unfortunately, the very information that is suppose to make us more efficient has instead become a thief, robbing us of our valuable time. Portals ... have been touted as enterprise tools that can help managers take lost time back.' (2000:17) Just like many other articles on the portal's strong points, Bannan stresses the importance of time-effective information access. Secondly, 'observing' Jane Q's actions during those 15 minutes, it demonstrates the primary difference between an enterprise intranet and enterprise portal: functionalities for customization and personalization. It is argued that the more an employee's desktop is customized, the less irrelevant information will clutter his/her desktop. Personalization takes this one step further, implying that an employee gains control over the information that reaches his/her computer. The literature agrees on this: portals will save you time, as your access to work-related information sources and digital work tools were 'selected' beforehand: they form part of your

desktop.

Of the many definitions of portals, Strauss' (2002:36–37) distinction between *customization and personalization* is important: a customized portal page is tailored to the specific employee who is logged on, that is, it knows to which department a user belongs, what role the user plays in the company (manager, middle management), what projects a user is involved in and many more. But everyone works differently and has different information needs. A portal allows for a further level in customization: to let the employee *personalize* his/her individual portal environment, for example, to subscribe or unsubscribe to specific sources, change backgrounds, colours or fonts; to set application parameters, create and edit profiles, add and remove links and so forth.

The problem exposed here, and a major limitation of the literature on the advantages of portals, or on their contribution to return on investment, or on their personalized information access functionalities, is that the term *information* was never qualified in portal context. In discussions, *information* is invariably used in its generic sense, that is, without identifying the nature or origin of the sources being mentioned, for example, is it internally generated reports, news feeds, financial tables, externally available (fee-based), downloaded full-text sources or links to bibliographic references accessible via information aggregators? It is suggested here that authors should be more specific when referring to *content* when discussing portals. Is it not time that a type of information taxonomy is developed and used when writing about portal content?

It is not very helpful to use the terms *content* or *information* without indicating its position within a particular portal environment, or its relationship with other categories of content within the portal. Internally generated enterprise information (especially enterprise *information portals*) is not 'the truth and nothing but the truth'. What about external, commercial information, especially those *hidden* entities that are only accessible via fee-based on-line database hosts? What about important enterprise-related information available via less obvious search techniques of the *hidden* or *invisible* Web? It is therefore obvious that extensive work should still be done on how this (seemingly neglected) external sector of the information industry could be integrated as one of the functionalities of a portal. Internally generated information is important, but good decision-making practices should keep in mind that external information, especially those only available at a fee, is just as important, especially in an environment where research (in general terms) is a high priority.

Pieter van Brakel
Editor

References

Bannan, B.J. 2002. Personalization and portals: if you build it (right) they will come. *EContent* 25(1):17–21.

Detlor, B. 2000. The corporate portal as information infrastructure: towards a framework for portal design. *International Journal of Information Management* 20(2):91–101.

Strauss, H. 2002. All about Web portals: a home page doth not a portal make. In: Katz, R.N. ed. *Web portals and higher education: technologies to make IT personal*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass: 33–40.

necessarily reflect the opinion of the Editor, Board, Publisher, Webmaster or the Rand Afrikaans University. The user hereby waives any claim he/she/they may have or acquire against the publisher, its suppliers, licensees and sub licensees and indemnifies all said persons from any claims, lawsuits, proceedings, costs, special, incidental, consequential or indirect damages, including damages for loss of profits, loss of business or downtime arising out of or relating to the user's use of the Website.