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Portals Take on a New Life

New Functionality Could Make Portals the Secret Weapon in Your IT Arsenal

by Ira Berk, SAP

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The role of the portal is changing within the enterprise. Facilitated in part by improved user interfaces (UIs), portals are becoming effective application deployment vehicles and full-featured collaboration hubs that improve productivity and increase ROI.

For several years, the adoption of SAP NetWeaver Portal has grown significantly; in the beginning of 2011, there were 10,000 live portal deployments. From using these portals to boost user productivity by enabling team collaboration via intranets, to driving down direct material costs by deploying supplier portals, to increasing customer satisfaction by launching customer portals, SAP clients have taken advantage of the robust capabilities SAP NetWeaver Portal offers.

And SAP is helping customers take full advantage of the portal revolution by further enhancing the functionality of its SAP NetWeaver Portal solution for end users, developers, and administrators. For **end users**, SAP offers more flexibility in accessing and creating content and applications by allowing users to personalize portal pages to achieve an intuitive, state-of-the-art user experience. SAP also makes it easier for end users to collaborate. Through internal development and strategic partnerships, SAP brings collaboration capabilities into our portal solutions, allowing users to work more efficiently through peer work groups. For **developers**, SAP brings enhanced development tools and additional supported standards, extending the portal to meet the diverse needs of the organization. For **administrators**, there are powerful tools for managing the portal landscape, allowing the company to run high-performance portals with little down time.

The Portal's Place in the Enterprise

Historically, portals were thought of as having a similar function to a company's intranet or an industry marketplace — they provided a method of disseminating company forms or basic information, but were not somewhere you'd find deep technology. However, as portals become places from which companies can deploy more application functionality to a broad set of users, businesses are realizing the true potential of using a portal.

SAP NetWeaver Portal 7.3 allows users to customize and streamline access to important applications and technology, speeding up the ROI of those applications by bringing more users on board more quickly. The portal is no longer just a centrally generated, universally consumed content environment; with SAP NetWeaver Portal, users can also create their own information for other employees, suppliers, customers, or the general public via the web.

Another way portals are increasing value to the enterprise is as a collaboration hub. Because portals have historically acted as a central location for enterprise information, they are a logical place for various parts of the enterprise to work together on projects. SAP NetWeaver Portal 7.3 takes this collaboration to a new level. Through the enterprise workspaces add-on functionality, SAP NetWeaver Portal allows users to create and share content, in real time, with other members of their team or work groups.

And because the portal ties directly into the SAP environment, these users have native access to all SAP content sources. Individual users or teams can create pages and share them so that all team members can get a live view of the same

information. Additionally, SAP NetWeaver Portal 7.3 enables users to create wikis and forums for further collaboration. And to ensure security within this collaborative hub — even while offering access to external users — the rights to access and create content in SAP NetWeaver Portal are managed through the SAP security framework.

With these capabilities, a portal can provide the information and interactive functionality that users depend on, rather than simply offering static information chosen by a central administrator.

"Just Right" UIs Are Key to Adoption

The first step in setting up a successful UI is recognizing the value that comes from customizing that UI to fit both the user and the task. While providing more casual users with a complicated UI is a recipe for disaster, so too is providing power users who are well-trained on a certain application with an oversimplified UI. Power users will become frustrated quickly if their access to the application's functionality is limited by a simplified interface. "A simple interface for a simple task" is a good rule of thumb when designing a UI, but keep in mind that even infrequent users come to a specific application for a reason; take those reasons into account and tailor the UI accordingly.

For example, imagine a travel expense solution that is accessed through a portal by a variety of users, including the CIO. While the CIO is certainly not just a "casual" user, in this case she does not require advanced functionality within the travel expense solution — it would likely only slow down the process. But a central travel administrator who must process thousands of reports and requires access to much deeper functionality from the same application would obviously need a more sophisticated interface.

SAP NetWeaver Portal 7.3 is designed with familiar elements to its UI that help speed adoption and expand use across a much wider universe. With an enhanced version of SAP NetWeaver Developer Studio, an open framework for custom development, and extensions that use powerful portal APIs and web services, it is easier than ever for developers to create powerful, individual, and appealing portal user experiences. With an Ajax-based portal look and feel, developers can easily customize and create unique, contemporary UIs.

We also eased portal administration by improving the integration layer for SAP, SAP BusinessObjects, and non-SAP applications. And improvements like simplified content creation and maintenance, system landscape management, and directory synchronization help improve server performance and reduce costs for overall portal operations and administration. (See sidebar for additional enhancements.)

New Solutions Expand Portal Capabilities

SAP has expanded its relationship with OpenText, a move that will mean more enhanced capabilities within SAP NetWeaver Portal. For example, a new enterprise solution that SAP and OpenText collaborated on — SAP Portal Content Management by OpenText — expands SAP NetWeaver Portal users' ability to manage any kind of document-related content — including spreadsheets, Microsoft Office documents, or PDFs — while providing access to an OpenText document repository for archiving, managing versions, and sharing permissions to documents.

SAP also worked with OpenText on a new website content management solution — SAP Portal Site Management by OpenText — that allows a broader set of users within an organization to create and manage the content on a web page running inside the framework of SAP NetWeaver Portal. Support for website content in multiple languages is also included. For customers who elect the option, this functionality comes fully pre-integrated as a built-in solution inside SAP NetWeaver Portal.

Down the (Mobile) Road

In keeping with industry trends, the future of portal technology will focus on adding mobile capabilities. In fact, the portal platform lends itself to mobile applications very naturally. For starters, SAP is working with customers to improve the navigation and display of SAP NetWeaver Portal pages on mobile devices. Further down the road, SAP is looking at how it will display SAP NetWeaver Portal within the container of the Sybase Unwired Platform, which would open up SAP NetWeaver Portal to a range of mobile-native features and capabilities.

This mobile push will also benefit on-premise users, since there's so much that on-premise UI designers can learn from mobile UIs. For example, because of the smaller form factors, mobile UIs must be extremely efficient and able to provide the right information to a specific user at the right time. Such a user-friendly, efficient UI would be quite helpful in the on-premise world as well.

To learn more about SAP NetWeaver Portal 7.3 and the future of portals and UIs in an SAP environment, visit **www.sdn.sap.com/irj/sdn/nw-portalandcollaboration**. ■

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