

Portals – They’re What We’ve Been Waiting For So What Are They All About?

Portals are the next evolution of the web for business, enabling better collaboration, integration and effective communication within your organisation.

But what is a portal, and what can it do for you and your company?

The Concept

Portals as a marketed product have been around since 1997, but have now evolved to the point where they can make a real difference to the way a company runs its business.

Fundamentally, a portal is a website that can be accessed via any standard web browser. It can be configured to allow internal (intranet) access, external (extranet, i.e. on the World Wide Web) access, or both.

But web and intranet sites are nothing new. The key difference between portals and ordinary web sites is the type of information portals can provide, and the way that information gets onto a portal in the first place. Keeping even a simple web site up-to-date would either require staff to liaise continually with web designers or to learn specialised technical skills. Portals, however, can be built and changed by the end-user.

Microsoft Sharepoint Portal

Here at Alba, we found the portal concept to be such a useful and powerful productivity tool that we’ve implemented it throughout our business. We use Microsoft Sharepoint Portal Server 2003 in conjunction with Office 2003, which allows us to leverage maximum benefit from the portal environment.

Not only is it used internally for document storage, discussions and technical knowledge base management, we also use it for externally facing customer support and engineering project sites, where we collaborate with our clients.

Like us, many other major companies such as Dell, HP, Hitachi, AstraZeneca, Honeywell, and Microsoft are benefiting from portal implementations.

Collaboration

A key feature of portals is that end-users can store files on them. They can view and edit

word processing, spreadsheet and database or any other required documents onto the portal. Not only that, but a whole site can be built around a document in a matter of minutes. For example, a user can write a project overview, publish it on the portal and create a site around this document, with task lists, discussion forums and project plans. They can then grant password-secured access to other users from inside or outside the company to allow them to work on it securely. This makes it very easy to create a simple website for a short project, even one that only lasts for a few days.

Bringing People Together

The ability to bring together different types of documents into a single space and work on them makes it much easier to bring teams of people together as well. Rather than having people working separately on different aspects of a project, portals bring all the relevant information together in one place that can be accessed easily by everyone, even people from other companies.

Efficiency and Flexibility

Having a central storage location for files means that rather than having to distribute copies of a document via email to a group every time it is revised, the document is updated once on the portal, and everyone instantly has access. Documents can be ‘checked out’ of a store by a user, allowing them to work exclusively on a document, save it, and then return it to the store as a new version, enforcing version control. Users can work on a document from outside the office with just a browser, the application required to open the document and an internet connection.

Web-Style Search

Another key benefit of portal document storage is being able to find files easily. A portal can be searched quickly and easily for



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documents and content. Having everyone working in the same place also prevents files from becoming lost, misplaced or accidentally deleted, and means that users can get to exactly the information they need, right when they need it, without having to trawl through multiple, disparate locations like network file systems, email storage or even local hard drives.

Customisation

The focus on allowing end-users to add content to portals means that departments and individual users can create their own pages on the company portal, and customise the content and appearance of these pages, without needing advanced training. Users create content using simple, safe building blocks, called 'web parts'. These web parts are small, self-contained pieces of code that are ready to use without the need for programming. All a user has to do is create a new page using the wizard, drag and drop a web part onto it, provide some basic content, and they're well on their way to building their own site.



Security and Audience Targeting

Another feature of portals is the ability to grant different people access to different areas. As you would expect, everyone in a company would have access to the main portal home page.

However, different areas of a portal can be targeted to specific audiences, and this goes right down to the page level. For example, a user who is a member of the sales team can get a different home page, with content specifically intended for them, from someone who is part of engineering. They can even customise the layout of the page to suit them. Another example might be that someone from senior management or accounts would be able to access confidential financial documents, whereas a newly joined production employee would not. Users can also have their own personal page, where they can access their own documents, calendar, address book, email and more.

Business Intelligence

Portals can deliver much more than the previous 'static' intranet generation. They represent a real opportunity to base business decisions and actions on dynamic real-time information. They enhance manufacturing visibility by actively delivering business data from a variety of sources, such as:

- Production statistics
- Batch records
- Process trends

And even use external information like:

- real-time utility/material costs
- stock market trends
- weather reports

You can analyse the data, perform advanced calculations on it to get KPIs, OEE and predictive maintenance calculations, and then publish results to the people in your company who need it, all in real-time. This leads to better, faster, more informed business decisions, through:

- Real-time business status monitoring
- Improved focus on asset utilisation
- Accelerated root cause analysis
- Regulatory compliance assistance

And you can do it all from your web browser.

What We Can Do

Alba can provide all this for your company and more. We can provide consultancy advice, planning, design, and integration, and can provide not only standard, out-of-the-box solutions, but also custom web parts tailored to meet virtually any requirement your company has.

Alba can help you to implement a first-class Sharepoint solution and gain the maximum business benefit and return on investment from this valuable technology.

The portal... it's what you've been waiting for.

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