Criteria for Picking the Right Portal Product

Varied features and a dynamic market make selection of the best portal product a daunting task. We provide a framework for selecting portal products.

The portal product market continues to be one of the most dynamic markets in the software industry. With more than 100 vendors to choose from, offering a varied list of product functionality, portal product selection can be very difficult. Extensive research is required to make an educated decision. Use of decision support tools, such as Gartner's Decision Driver for Enterprise Portal Selection, greatly facilitates the process. Specific things to look for include:

Features and Functions: When selecting a portal product, many enterprises only look at the feature list. Although features and functions are critical, they are only two of many criteria. Enterprise requirements should be documented, and these requirements should be matched against the capabilities of various vendors. Particularly important are:

- Basic Generation-One functionality
- A good list of robust Generation-Two features (see “Generation-Two Portal Products Emerge,” SPA-11-7034)
- Indications that Generation Three is not far away (see “Generation-Three Portal Products: Unification,” SPA-13-6140)

Architecture: A solid architectural foundation is critical to scalability and manageability. Portal products that run as a set of servlets on a Web server are not as architecturally robust as those that run on and leverage an application server. Many vendors claim that their products will run on a variety of application servers. While they may be able to run Java Server Pages (JSPs) on a multitude of application server platforms, this is insufficient. Portal products must leverage the load balancing, security, integration, task management and prioritization features of application servers. Be wary of false claims by vendors in this area.
The portal product should sport an open architecture as well. This doesn’t imply that it must run on Unix, but the portal must provide an integration framework that will connect to all the repositories and applications of the enterprise, regardless of the environment in which they run.

Out-of-the-Box-Functionality: Portal products come with a set of pre-built integration components (e.g., portlets, gadgets, omlets, e-clips, i-views) for repositories (e.g., NT file servers), horizontal applications (e.g., Exchange, Domino, eRoom) and vertical applications (e.g., SAP, PeopleSoft, Baan, Siebel). Enterprise requirements should be matched as closely as possible to the pre-built integration component list provided by the vendor. Those repositories and applications that aren’t on the vendor list will require custom integration components, which will have to be written by enterprise developers or by a systems integrator.

Partnerships: A portal product vendor that tries to provide everything doesn’t “get it.” Partnerships and relationships are key to success in the portal game. There are 13 key partnerships to look for (see “Thirteen Key Partnerships for Enterprise Portal Vendors,” SPA-10-5666). Find portal product vendors that are well-connected. Also, beware of vendor hype: Look at the details of integration with a particular vendor’s technology or content. Just because a portal product vendor claims integration doesn’t mean that it’s adequate for your purposes.

Vendor Stability: The dynamics of the portal product market continue to be the biggest risk in the selection of a portal product (see “Portal Products: A Market in Distress,” SPA-12-9983). Most vendors in this market are “pure plays.” The typical pure-play vendor is small (i.e., it has $20 million to $30 million/year revenue, fewer than 200 employees and fewer than 100 customers), privately held and unprofitable. Most portal product pure-play vendors will not exist in their current form by YE02. You should look at the finances of the vendor, noting especially cash on hand compared to “burn rate.” In a negative cash flow company, this is an indicator of how long it can continue operating without going back for more investment funding or going public. You should pin down the vendor on the time frames for positive cash flow operations, profitability and going public. Ask for proof points and cross-validate with other sources.

Adherence to Standards: The enterprise should look for a match between its key standards for IT. Key standards are XML (for data interoperability/exchange), Java (for portal components) and Web services (.NET, Java Web services or both).
Security: Portal products have some level of security, but the strength of that security varies. Look for products that have built-in features to allow use of strong authentication (beyond userID/password) and integrated access control, or partnerships with extranet access management (EAM) vendors.

Vertical Industry Support: Portal products provide vertical industry support by delivering integration components to relevant industry applications, domain-specific taxonomies and domain expertise.

Solid Customer References: Vendors are more than happy to provide a list of customers. Many times, these lists consist of recent deployments where everything went smoothly. You should look beyond this list and demand a complete list of customers. Because the 2.0 release of an enterprise portal demands much more custom integration work than the 1.0 release, you should demand that the list include customers that have had their portals for at least a year and have moved beyond the 1.0 release.

Bottom Line: Selection of the correct portal product requires enterprises to complete their homework. Look well beyond the feature and function list, and be especially aware of the market dynamics affecting the vendors on your short list.