Executive Information Portals
Comparison & Selection Guide

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Docid: 00017648

Publication Date: 0305

Publication Type: SELECTION

Preview

Enterprise information portals, or EIPs are a convenient, centralized doorway to an organization's internal data. EIP software can be effectively personalized to present only the necessary data for each individual employee or employee group, saving an organization time and money. EIPs can also be provided to customers, partners, and even the general public, allowing them access to a company's information. Any corporation that relies heavily upon massive amounts of internal data will be able to benefit from an EIP. This guide discusses what EIPs are, what to look for when selecting one, and the market leaders.

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Executive Summary

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Enterprise information portals (EIPs) can be the focal point of an organization's knowledge management strategy. EIPs provide quick and easy access to various forms of corporate data, ranging from sales charts to e-mails and much more. As more technology vendors see the uses and potential of EIPs, they are beginning to flood the market with their own products. The market for enterprise information portals is currently reporting sales in the hundreds of millions of dollars, with that figure expected to reach billions of dollars in the near future. The increase in sales shows that administrators know the value of EIPs.

The future for enterprise information portals looks bright. Some have envisioned a variety of technologies that EIPs will be able to incorporate. One feature the future could hold is the inclusion of streaming video and audio, which could include e-learning and e-training components. Adding these features to an
organization's corporate portal could provide a reduction in its overall training costs, further contributing to an organization's return on investment, or ROI. Another step that EIPs are taking is allowing outsiders to connect to their portal. By allowing suppliers, customers, and the general public access to specific information, a company can effectively market their products or services to others. If a user can find what they are looking for via a company's portal rather than via a phone call, both parties can benefit. Some vendors are also beginning to think of the mobile worker in their portals. Mobile workers have the ability, in some portals, to access the corporate information they need via a variety of ways outside the desktop computer. Some of the advances include personal digital assistants, or PDAs, and cellular phones that are able to reach the data they need. Instant messaging and discussion forums, if accepted into a corporation's landscape, can also see acceptance in the future of EIPs.

**Description**

EIPs are known by a variety of names. Amongst some of the variations, EIPs are called corporate portals, enterprise portals, or knowledge portals. Whatever name they go by, these portals essentially act as a single gateway into the information a company has stored, whether it be structured or unstructured. Enterprise information portals, often compared to Internet portals, are set up like a regular web browser on each employee's desktop, and can be set up via a user's preferences. If an employee is using an EIP in a sales group, they may have their preferences set up quite differently than a member of a human resources department. It also allows a user to add other modules, or portlets, such as a stock ticker or company news, depending on a company's or specific group's policy.

By having each individual's or departments' needs customized on their desktops, corporate portals allow each employee to tap into the data they need, such as e-mail, enterprise resource planning systems, and data warehouse systems, without having to sort through the irrelevant information that can delay their work. A user can simply type in a keyword, and the EIP will bring back results of that search. By filtering data down to only the requested information, tasks become increasingly efficient for the user. The results of a search produce an easier, highly focused search for whatever they may need at a particular time.

When properly installed, enterprise information portals have access to the corporate data of the entire enterprise. Each individual company has different sources where they store their data, and while all EIPs do not provide support for each, most portals have an extensive list of sources they do support, including types from a variety of vendors.

**Selection Criteria**

Enterprise information portals can help a company sift through all of the data they collect. The amount of data will vary depending on a number of factors, but the need to access that data quickly and accurately is a common need. In choosing an EIP, each company should know what their needs are for the portal and how they plan to use the portal to best satisfy their needs. It is also worth noting that not all corporate portal deployments are successful. Estimates range from 20 percent to 30 percent of all EIP roll-outs fail. There are a variety of reasons for the failures, which can include poor installation and poor training of employees.

**Interoperability**

The EIP should support the operating systems (OSs) being used within an organization. There could be several, and that number could change, so it is prudent to choose an enterprise information portal that supports several operating systems, or at minimum, the OS currently in use at the company. The EIP
must also support all forms of data wishing to be accessed in the corporation. While all EIPs support most widespread data bases, it is best to check with the manufacturer for specific applications, such as whether a company's e-mail program can be accessed. An enterprise information portal which doesn't support all of a company's data sources isn't nearly as valuable as one which does.

Personalization

One of the main draws to enterprise information portals is the ability to personalize data content to suit a large variety of users. Personalization allows an EIP to be set-up for either an individual's or a group's role, preferences, and habits. It will also be valuable of an enterprise information portal can be set up for either an individual setting or a group, or community, setting. Products that allow for both will prove much more usable than those that simply allow for one or the other. Setting every individual's settings will prove time intensive, while allowing for the possibility of mistake. Group settings are much less time intensive, and mistakes will be easier to pick up on. Preferences set on group project levels are beneficial since all team members are guaranteed to receive the same relevant data. Administrators should also consider the ability of a portal to be customized to each company's personal needs. This could range from number of users to customized programs already in place within their database.

Development Tools

Used for creating applications and further developing enterprise information portals, development tools can be very helpful in fitting EIPs to corporate data sources. A customizable EIP might be necessary for the type of data sources a company wishes to access, so it is best to check with the manufacturer as to its importance.

Security

An enterprise information portal must be equipped with a reliable and effective security system. As an EIP allows for access to a business' most vital and personal data, if that information falls into the wrong hands, the results could be devastating. Is it also important that an EIP only allows specific users access to the data they need. For example, users who are not involved with a human resources department should not be able to access information stored by the department, such as the salary of their neighbor at the next desk. As vendors continue to allow more and more users to access the portals, the risk for a security breach is also increased. Business partners, suppliers, and the general public who are given access to a company's portal must only be allowed to view only the information the company allows. Workers who are outside of the organization, who access the portal via PDAs, laptop computers or cellular phones, need to be responsible that their access does not fall into the wrong hands.

Ease of Use

It is important that an enterprise information portal is easy to use. Not only is it necessary that the end-users of the portal be able to understand how to work with the software, it is important that administrators be able to set up the portal easily and quickly. Also, if it is necessary to add on other functions or more users, the EIP should be able to incorporate these without significant trepidation for administrators.

Implementation

The time it takes to install an EIP will differ depending on a number of factors. The installation time can depend on how many end-users an organization has, which systems a company has in place, and how many or which departments a company chooses to launch the EIP in. Some vendors offer out-of-the-box products, which they claim can be installed in less than a day. If a system is complicated, the system will take longer to install. Some companies are turning to outside experts to install their systems. Some vendors in the field offer their services for a fee, while other companies may choose to hire professional help to install their systems.

Other Considerations
Other criteria includes scalability, performance, and price. A corporate-wide or departmental EIP must be able to grow with the company, so it is important that an EIP be able to accommodate whatever growth the company will go through. Whether the company grows in terms of users, the technology they add/update, or both, a portal should be able to adjust to whatever need the organization has. The portal should also allow its users to get at the information they need, when they need it. Searches should be returned quickly and efficiently, whether there is one or there are several thousand users at any given moment. Prices to install EIPs can vary on numerous factors, including the number of users a system needs to support and the sophistication of a portal. For most vendors, the portal costs will be based on the number of licenses, or end-users, a company needs.

**Market Leaders**

The EIP market is in the process of separating. On one end, independent vendors, such as Plumtree, produce only EIP products. On the other side, there are technology giants, such as IBM and Microsoft, which are using their weight in other markets to promote their own EIP products, as well as snatching up smaller vendors for their products and technology. Independent vendors, which make up about 75 percent of the market currently, are anticipated to make up only 25 percent of the market by 2005. A great deal of companies are vying for a part of the market, which is expected to grow by leaps and bounds.

Studies have shown that the EIP software market, which showed sales of $550 million in 2001, will explode to a staggering $3.1 billion in 2006, while others have the market growing to $2 billion during the same time period. Market share varies depending on which study and which company is asked, but analysts seem to generally view IBM, Microsoft, and Plumtree as leaders in the field. One study showed Plumtree leading the market with 21 percent market share, trailed by IBM in second place, holding 14 percent of the market.

The driving factor for the growth in this market is recognition. As more and more larger vendors come into the market, the technology, and its advantages, are brought to the general public's landscape. As more companies come to realize what an EIP can bring to their business, the more installations are expected to occur. It is prudent, however, to note that the technology is in a critical phase. If those buying the technology are able to find it useful, then the market is likely to grow. If more companies, however, find that the technology does not live up to expectations, or can not fulfill its promises, than the market is just as likely to falter.

**Market Leader Comparison**

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About the Author

Daniel Figueiredo is an editor in the Comparison and Selection Guide group at Faulkner Information Services, covering the telecommunications and computing industry.

Web Links

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IBM: http://www.ibm.com/
Microsoft: http://www.microsoft.com/
Plumtree: http://www.plumtree.com/

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