

Web Portals Constituent Group Meeting Notes
November 6, 2003

Don't know about the rest of you, but I found our hour together one of the most useful of the entire conference. I hope we can continue the collaboration and sharing of ideas on this list.

Note: Due to a change in schedule, the group met on a different date and time than noted in the conference session guide. From my understanding, a number of people showed up anyway and had a good discussion. If someone was taking notes from that unofficial meeting, could you either send them to me or post to this list?

The group that met on Thursday numbered about 35. We split into two groups, one discussing portal selection criteria, and the other application integration and other issues. The below are notes (thanks to Rob Wright from U of Buffalo!) from the application integration group; if the person taking notes for the portal selection group could send me their notes or post them to this list, that would be great.

A quick survey of the first 19 participants found that:

- 11 had existing portals
 - 4 used SCT/Luminus
 - 3 had homegrown solutions using J2EE, Perl, and PHP
 - 1 used Academus/uPortal
 - 1 used uPortal
 - 1 used CP WebTraditions (?)
 - 1 used Vignette
- (vendor responses removed)

Single Sign On (SSO)

We had an interesting conversation regarding the role of single-sign on and portals on campus.

Carnegie Mellon (CMU) - has secondary challenge/response in some of their apps - even though they have SSO. They use pubcookie-kerberos.

University at Buffalo (UB) - we think that we will do the same thing as CMU (once we have SSO). At the Internet 2 Single sign-on CAMP, they expressed that they didn't think having one login to absolutely everything was a good idea either. Their goal is less-signons. What they espouse is to group applications into communities of associated apps and have single sign-on for that community of apps.

Others, including Indiana, expressed less concern because the application is still responsible for doing the AUTHZ (authorization).

Authentication (AuthN) / Integrating Microsoft things into portals

We had a short discussion on what people are using for AUTHN (authentication). Some people are using LDAP (storing the password in

the directory), and some are using Kerberos. A couple people mentioned using Active Directory because of their strong use of Microsoft products.

Southwest Missouri State (SMS) - Is anyone integrating Microsoft stuff into their portal? They've talked about using AD for authentication.

Jim Farmer - everyone should look into DSML (Directory Services Markup Language?). This facilitates integration with Microsoft products. I think Jim mentioned that Blackboard may be doing something that utilizes this.

Indiana University (IU) - using Yale CAS - CAS has a ISAPI module that allows apps to participate in the sso environment.

Vendors and decomposition of applications

Barry Walsh asked - Are we chasing unrealistic goals to have vendors decompose their applications? He hopes they do, but realistically doesn't see any reason why they would.

CMU - thinks as WSRP (Web Services for Remote Portlets) gains prominence, the vendors will be forced to decompose their apps. He mentioned that in 60-90 days some tools are going to start to support this.

Barry (IU) - I hope they do - but - if I'm a vendor - I've got a captive audience - so why would I do that?

Doug (CMU) - in the long run - as competitors start to provide this service - this will force them to do this.

Jameson (KUMC) - vendors like PeopleSoft claim you can decompose their apps right now; you just need to understand their APIs, which are very complex.

IU (Barry Walsh) - we had PeopleSoft try to use their own API's to do some integration for us. After 6 months of working on it, they couldn't get it to work and gave up.

IU and KUMC have bypassed PS logic and doing read-only views from the underlying PS databases to provide online pay stubs and other services.

Miscellaneous deployment issues

IU - has some locked-down, unmovable channels - most are university communications and core services.

IU plans on having that be THE official (called the "Action List") communication channel - this will not be moved. They don't trust email as a reliable source of information distribution.

The services that are locked down include their search feature (which gives the ability for the user to search Google, the library, and other

IU sites). Also, the navigation is locked down.

UB does the same, but only locks down the "important university messages" channel at this time.

Personalization

At IU, about 15% personalize.

Jim Farmer stated that at Yale, they had some incredible % of students personalize in the first 5 days (something like 87%). When asked what the reason was, they said, "we don't know."

Someone asked: has personalization caused a support problems, because the help support person really can't see what the user sees? IU hasn't seen any impact on support. UB doesn't anticipate that it will impact support either.

Saskatchewan - personalization is being used a lot.

Anyone doing any reporting that helps track uses behavior?

U B- we use a model like the web ad firm Doubleclick. Any link you click on, actually runs a program that logs the URL and general info about the person, including role on campus.

Anyone doing anything with Handhelds and portals?

IU - has a homegrown course management system (OnCourse), and they are currently doing a proof of concept with handhelds that appears to be working very well - they call it "Mobile OnCourse".

Jim Farmer (Udel) - uPortal is doing some good things to support handhelds - they're using xml and xslt so these apps will run on handhelds and render well.

Also noted that Ian Dolphin and Hull University have written some skins (for handhelds).

Can anyone report any killer apps that they've got?

Jim Farmer (Udel) mentioned the HULL study, which, using many focus groups identified and rank orders dozens of features that a portal might have. You can find links to this information on the ja-sig.org website (under the UK section).

<http://www.ja-sig.org>

<http://www.ja-sig.org.uk/>

http://www.learndev.hull.ac.uk/portal_survey/

Illinois State and UB both reporting success with their "What if GPA Calculators".

UB also noted that their "Schedule Wizard" has had much success. It allows students to build up to 100 iterations of schedules for an upcoming semester; it allows students to block out certain times. No direct integration with the Web Registration system.

CMU - much success with their personalized event calendar. This has been really successful because we have so many disparate event systems. Having this also has the side benefit of enabling "recognized" organizations to push calendar events.

Modem Speed

CSU asked - is anyone doing anything about modem speed, the problems that people with slow modems cause on portals?

IU - this is a problem for us because we use iFrame, which, if the page has 10 channels, this is essentially 10 page requests. So as not to cause usability issues, IU uses a clever way to get around this problem by allowing users the option to open the portal with all channels minimized.

IU - also, we try to strike up agreements with broadband providers, so that we tend to have less people out there with slow modems.

UB has implemented a reverse proxy web server. This essentially is a web server that sits in front of your main web server. It can run on the same machine, or a separate machine. The reverse proxy handles all communications with browsers, freeing up your real server to run code, talk to databases, etc. The reverse proxy also caches images, css files, etc. We saw a nice improvement in throughput when this was implemented. It is currently implemented on the same machine as the main web server, but we plan to move it to a separate machine soon.

Portal Real Estate

IU - we have some challenges with ex-webmasters that want to publish image heavy content to our portal.

CMU - have a cross campus team that we're bought in from the beginning, and just naturally understand the issues.

Another approach suggested by Jim (Udel) and others - just give them criteria - it must render in n seconds, the graphic must be no larger than nn K, with dimensions no larger than n pixels wide, and n pixels high.

KUMC - building rich apps into the portal sort of defeats the purpose of the portal. You want to build lite content and data cameos that gives you quick/easy access to more feature rich apps.

Who has a Login box to your portal on your University Homepage?

KUMC - second tier pages targeted at groups (students, faculty/staff, researchers) have a login, but not homepage

U of the Pacific - we are not putting login on the homepage.

Anyone doing anything clever in triaging questions that come through the portal?

One college (South Orange County Community College) is using "Interactive Agents" from activebuddy.com. From the activebuddy.com site, "Interactive agents are software applications, often called "bots," that interact with users over a messaging service like IM, web chat, or wireless networks."

There was apparently a good presentation done by this college. Their site for this service is: <http://www.mysiteagent.com>