

Workspace portals: Desktops of the future

By Peter Cheese and S. William Ives

Once used primarily as communication and knowledge management tools, portals can now transform workforce performance and link that performance to business value.

If you think of your computer screen as a window into your world of work, how far can you see? Not too long ago, people could see only the applications they used most often. Today, however, thanks to a hot business solution called the portal, we have the potential to see about as far as we want—to enterprise data and applications, personal productivity and virtual collaboration tools, and documented knowledge. We can communicate more effectively across the organization and with business partners, suppliers and customers. We can find and collaborate with teams of experts located anywhere in the world (for a related article, see page 64).

Portals first came on the scene as generic communications channels and knowledge management tools, sometimes as a replacement for corporate intranets. Now what we call “workspace portals” can be personalized for specific roles and processes. Advanced portals are helping companies transform workforce performance and link that performance to business value by integrating, in a single and personalized interface, all the tools, assets

and applications employees need to do their jobs more effectively.

But portals are more than just tools and applications—they are the desktops of the future. And it is expected that by 2006, they will have become a technology market worth \$2.6 billion.

Still, as organizations begin to rush toward portal solutions, they must beware of seeing them only through a technology lens. A portal by itself does nothing if it is not effectively focused on specific business outcomes. If they are to be successful, workspace portals must focus on workforce transformation to drive business value. In other words, it's not the quality of the window that counts, but rather what you can see and do because of it.

Supporting the work

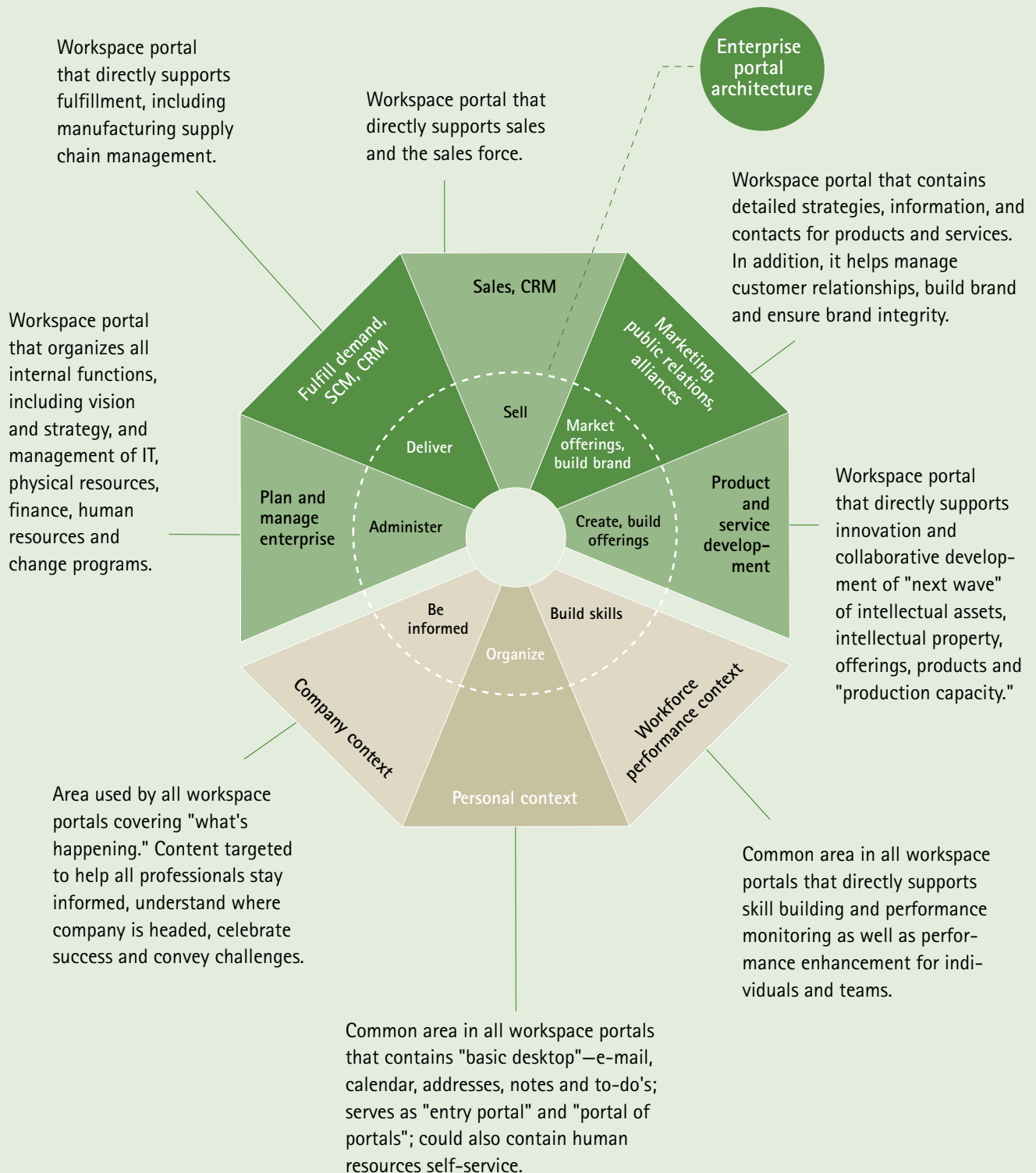
Much of the power of the workspace portal comes from the manner in which it supports whatever work needs to be done. To improve performance, workspace portals must align to processes and roles in specific industries, enabling employees to more effectively view the knowl-

edge they need, understand how that knowledge can support decision making and then act through integrated applications.

These three capabilities—view, understand and act—traditionally have been disconnected, if they were present at all. A workspace portal makes all three possible in an integrated way. By thinking about workspace portals in terms of specific user roles, processes or intentions, they can be seen more as a “family” of related workspace portals within an enterprise (see chart, page 74).

Here's how it works. Accenture recently partnered with a company in the communications industry to implement a suite of portals around different business processes. Because a portal will deliver value only if it's aligned with specific goals, the project began with the identification of business objectives. The team then proceeded with the design of a common enterprisewide architecture with those objectives in mind. This enabled the company to build a workspace portal with the content and applications appro-

Access to portals across the enterprise can help break down silos to enhance performance.



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appropriate for the business objectives that integrated:

- A B2B portal that enabled business customers and employees to place orders and exchange information.
- A B2C portal that helped customer service representatives to better understand and enhance their Web presence, thereby promoting additional bricks-and-mortar traffic.
- An employee portal that facilitated internal information exchange as well as widespread access to external information providers and internal networks of experts.
- A common area in the employee portal that enabled such online transactions as submitting forms, monitoring benefits and updating personal information.

This example demonstrates how integrating workspace portals with an enterprise computing platform can substantially enhance the levels of performance and value that can be achieved in the next generation of ERP solutions (for a related article, see page 48). Portals bring together, in a single integrated approach, traditionally siloed initiatives such as content management, knowledge management, information personalization and enterprise application integration. By using a common architecture, taxonomy and interface, workspace portals provide a shared area where ideas can be exchanged and discussed.

Supporting the worker

The tools that support performance or virtual collaboration lose much of their power when the work and collaboration occur in a manner and place separate from where workers typically perform their jobs. We move to some separate room, for example, for a videoconference, then return to

our desks; we log on to a website for application sharing, work together as a team, then log off and go back to “normal.”

But the portal as a desktop provides a single view of the work, and gives members of a team a view of their workplace that has the potential to unite them, not make them feel cut off from one another and from their work. As portals evolve from being used primarily as communication and knowledge management tools to supporting the real-time performance of collaborative job tasks, they promise to provide a workspace dimension that is not only unified but also unifying. That is, they can enhance the feeling of connectedness that is vital to the culture of a company.

Properly designed and delivered, workspace portals provide a common area where ideas, information and resources can be exchanged and discussed. Through this open exchange, workers' performance can be enhanced and better directed toward organizational goals.

An important but often overlooked point about portals is that the rhetoric about a “single point of entry” may oversimplify how difficult they are to integrate. In fact, a portal solution most often is a “federated” one: An enterprise portal may provide the common entry point for all users. But these users will then be passed through to their relevant workspace portal, which is focused on their particular performance needs.

This means that companies must think strategically about their portal technology and infrastructure so that they don't end up with multiple technologies that cannot be brought together easily. Adding to the complexity is that a market shakeout for portal providers is probably on the

horizon; some players may well disappear or get bought out, so decisions about portal solutions must be made carefully.

In spite of these challenges, workspace portals offer highly promising solutions to companies that want to support their workers in ways that connect workforce performance to strategic and financial goals. Portals can accelerate time to market for new products, improve the rate of first-call resolution at call centers, decrease the time required for the repair of complex equipment and boost sales—all of which increase profitability and shareholder value. ■

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