

Summary

The late 1990s were marked by euphoria surrounding enterprise portals and how they could transform organizations. Today the IT industry cannot stop talking about Web 2.0 and the consumerization of information technology. In this climate enterprise portal vendors are fighting to stay relevant by integrating Web 2.0 functionality and partnering with consumer Web 2.0 companies. Information professionals considering Web 2.0 solutions for their portal should be cautious about whom to partner with and why. The portal vendors may not have all the answers just yet.

Portals Appear to Have Lost Their Luster to Web 2.0

Web 2.0 and its architecture of participation—with remixing from multiple sources and SOA—has heralded a new era for the Web and the enterprise. Never before have so many individuals felt empowered and capable of contributing, interacting and meaningfully influencing others via the Internet. But Web 2.0 solutions present problems for information management professionals too - enormous amounts of unstructured content, quirky and un-standardized categorizations, challenges in integrating with enterprise data, weak security and questionable interoperability, to name but a few. As a result, it's no surprise that many organizations have ignored the Web 2.0 trends at first. And taking their lead from corporate customers and buyers, the portal vendors haven't paid much attention to Web 2.0 trends either.

However, today everybody—from CIOs to developers—is talking about Web 2.0 in the enterprise (referred commonly as enterprise 2.0) and how organizations need to refit their infrastructures to allow for more bottom-up technology and user driven content¹. So where does this leave an enterprise portal? Portal vendors have been furiously trying to catch up with the consumer trends by enhancing their product offerings to include more Web 2.0 components. These vendors want their customers to upgrade their portal infrastructure to be Web 2.0 ready using the vendors' own portal extensions.

¹ For more information see the Forrester March, 2007 Trends "[CIOs Want Suites For Web 2.0](#)" article

Portal Trends to Follow Web 2.0 in 2007 / 2008

Six key trends define how the portal vendors are fighting for relevance and loyalty within organizations. These trends also reveal how an organization's portal can be upgraded to meet evolving Web 2.0 needs.

- **Portal vendors rush to integrate Web 2.0 functionality with mixed results.** Leading portal vendors have realized that they need to integrate Web 2.0 technologies into their application suites to stay relevant. Niche players like Social Text, NewsGator, Traction Software and others have stolen mindshare and in a few cases, dollars too. To stay relevant and provide greater ROI to their customers, vendors have integrated RSS, blogging, wikis, RIA applications, social bookmarking, prediction markets and other similar tools into their product suites. These integrations allow information managers to deploy specific Web 2.0 portlets from their existing administration consoles to certain target audiences protecting existing user segmentation, profiling, security and privacy requirements.
- **Expect tighter integration in the future as portal vendors try to blur the lines.** The vendors are trying to move between traditional composite applications seen on portals and mashups, which are more common in the Web 2.0 world. BEA's Project Graffiti solution, which allows users to tag content from any enterprise content source and build a bottom up personal categorization system, is an example of Web 2.0 functionality in a portal environment. SAP plans to integrate Web 2.0 solutions into its application software and Netweaver middleware products later this year. So far the results of these portal upgrades have been mixed and company portals like Aflac's, (an insurance company) which successfully provides free form publishing and collaboration, are in the minority.
- **Portal vendors partner to integrate consumer technologies.** Portal vendors are aware that niche Web 2.0 software companies are not their only threats. Users want their favorite websites and consumer applications accessible via the enterprise portals. For example, they do not want to have to move back and forth between a "my page" on an employee intranet and a "my page" on a Google, Yahoo or MSN website. Forced to choose, many prefer the consumer-oriented websites to their company ones.

To combat this issue, portal vendors must partner with consumer companies to integrate their functionality or gadgets into their enterprise portal software. IBM's partnership with Google, which allows Google style gadgets to appear in WebSphere pages as portlets, is an early example of how enterprise vendors are combating this issue.
- **Portal vendors take portal functionality outside the portal.** Alas, the world does not begin or end with the enterprise portal. A single, enterprise wide role based customized and personalized portal is no longer considered the Holy Grail even though some enterprises still continue to push in that direction². Some organizations are sidestepping the single enterprise portal vision for nifty, localized, low cost solutions that meet very specific, targeted department needs.

² For more information see the Forrester April, 2007 Trends "[Single Employee Portal Vision Escapes Many Companies](#)" article.

Portal vendors can combat this trend by extending their portal functionality beyond the confines of their own portal infrastructure. Just as Google gadgets can run in a WebSphere portal, so too should WebSphere portlets run on iGoogle or other enterprise software. Decoupling gadgets from their portal infrastructure using standards like JSR286 and WSRP allow these portal vendors to find new buyers and new homes for their gadgets. In other words, by acting like a nice Web 2.0 software development company, portal vendors can stay relevant. BEA and Microsoft are certainly moving in this direction but it is still uncertain how successful and transformative their efforts will be. When assessing portal vendors, information professionals should look at vendors that are willing to think out of the box in this manner.

- **Portal vendors pay attention to information workplace solutions.** The portal vendors have realized that the best way to compete with the onslaught of the niche Web 2.0 vendors is by moving up the value chain. In this case it means providing the contextual, role-based delivery of voice, documents, rich media, process models, business intelligence, eLearning and collaboration tools that constitute the information workplace³. Integrating their solutions more tightly with how information workers actually accomplish tasks is becoming the new Holy Grail for portal vendors.

Unified communication solutions that include audio and video teleconferencing are in the product roadmaps for many portal vendors too. Information professionals should expect their portal vendors to pitch them more information workplace solutions in the near future. Here vendors like Microsoft, which already has both portal, and unified communication solutions are at an advantage.

- **Portal vendors become Web 2.0 companies themselves.** Imitation is the greatest form of flattery. Portal vendors worried about their relevancy are reforming to look more like Web 2.0 companies. They're adopting software languages more commonly seen in Web 2.0 arenas such as SOAP, WDSL, XML, HTTP and AJAX so that they can integrate and bring solutions to market more quickly. But with legacy-installed bases at customer sites, it will take time for the portal vendors to evolve their offerings. Nevertheless, they too will mature and a time may come when the portal vendors are at the forefront of Web 2.0 innovations.

BEA's Project Holland, which allows business users to collaboratively develop and populate workspaces with page components to then enable the same user to use those spaces, is an example of a vendor taking Web 2.0 principles to heart. Here too it is too early to tell how successful they will be.

Recommendations

Cautiously integrate web 2.0 into your portal

Portal vendors do not want to be left behind. They are extending their portal offerings, retooling their applications, partnering with other vendors and promising their customers that they can provide the best of Web 2.0—but with enterprise level security, enterprise data integration, role-based personalization and centralized administration.

³ For more information see the the Forrester August, 2006 Trends "[Collaboration Trends 2006 to 2007.](#)" article.

Organizations planning to extend their enterprise portal infrastructures with Web 2.0 offerings need to keep several factors in mind when choosing whether to depend on their existing portal vendor or buy products from a niche web 2.0 vendor.

- **Don't expect the large portal vendors to have all the Web 2.0 answers.** The biggest portal vendors are often the slowest to move and that may be the case here. Do not expect the portal vendors to have the best solution in the marketplace for a particular need. For example, while a product may be the most secure, it may not be the most innovative, appropriate or usable. Plus, Web 2.0 solutions that are too tightly coupled with an existing enterprise portal may not drum up excitement among information workers if the portal itself has a bad reputation.
- **Seriously look at offerings from smaller web 2.0 vendors.** In particular, work to understand how those solutions can be integrated into your portal infrastructure. For example, HP Computers decided to go with a niche Web 2.0 company when building its highly successful prediction market tool.
- **Recognize that Web 2.0 cannot do portal triage duty.** Incorporating Web 2.0 features into a portal environment will not save a portal or impress an executive team. Web 2.0 solutions, especially the collaborative solutions, solve specific business problems. Web 2.0 solutions may be targeted at problems the enterprise's portals are not capable of solving—either now or in the future. Don't rush to integrate Web 2.0 offerings into your portal environments. First create a strong business case and an ROI model and then go shopping. Keep in mind that people only use technology that adds value to their workplace interactions.
- **Understand that enterprise portals can be in conflict with Web 2.0.** Some of the underlying principles driving the growth of Web 2.0 solutions can be in direct conflict with enterprise portals. For example, consumer web wikis like Wikipedia have been successful by allowing users anonymity and setting few centralized controls. Anonymity is something that than enterprise portal infrastructure may not allow. But without the same level of anonymity, an employee may not feel comfortable editing a superior's work or truly collaborating in an uninhibited manner. Most Web 2.0 solutions are primarily social tools that encourage users to spend extended amounts of time—sometimes to the point of distraction. This may go against the ethos of the enterprise portal, which might be designed as a dashboard to encourage users to view metrics and accomplish tasks online quickly so they can then move onto other parts of their job.

About the Author



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