

# Adding self-service Web sites can reduce people and development costs

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If you're looking to add self-service functions to your business's Web site, you're in good company. The practice can lighten the load for customers, employees, and business partners, while also improving user satisfaction and loyalty.

In the past, adding a gateway for these users to view their accounts or to take advantage of many other self-service features, often meant plodding a long and expensive development cycle that started from scratch.

More recently, companies have learned to shave off much time and expense by using portal software as a platform to speed development and deployment of these access points and related Web applications.

## Adding self-service to reduce labor costs

Web portals allow partners, employees and customers to choose their user experience, with personalized applications based on role, context, actions, location, preferences and team collaboration needs. Web pages accessible within a portal, or "portlets," can provide employees, external customers and partners with custom information about their HR needs, orders, invoices, records and other requests culled from numerous sources and tailored to individual needs. Many companies use a portal-based approach to provide self-service functions for internal and external users.

By adding portals, companies seek to deliver a satisfying experience in which information changes dynamically, according to user requests. The strategy broadens the constituency that each organization can serve, and can ultimately improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The biggest win may be the potentially tremendous cost savings that organizations can reap. For example, a government site that allows public access can greatly reduce the burden on employees, who would otherwise field the inquiries in person – and for citizens, who are able to get faster, consistent service. Suppliers can log in any time to peruse current orders and related pricing and invoices and agreements. Health care organizations can streamline operations by letting patients, doctors and suppliers access appropriate records and accounts to enhance the customer experience and reduce administration costs.

## **Developing on your own, or with help?**

Once you've decided to pursue a portal strategy, consider how you'll develop your project. While many companies continue to work from scratch, others have found that portal software can greatly speed the process and reduce development costs – despite that the former may appear cheaper at first glance.

Portal software often includes many “pre-built” services that facilitate Web development. Instead of creating the same services or components repeatedly for each application or portlet, developers may simply customize new application capabilities during development to speed the process. And much more control is given to non-technical business users, who can set up and customize their own sites. These functions can include authentication and security, the ability to deliver content by job role, and other common personalization features.

The savings can be significant, especially when you factor in true labor and maintenance costs. For example, recent in-depth interviews of IBM WebSphere Portal customers by IDC reveal a 29-percent lower total cost of ownership when compared with unaided development, over a five-year period.

More specifically, labor costs to deploy portals and applications cost 38-percent less than building from scratch, and every dollar spent on portal software yielded \$4.80 in IT labor avoidance. Users also experienced a 78-percent faster time to market with applications developed on the platform.

Because companies must stay competitive within an increasingly challenging business environment, portal software can make good business and financial sense.

## **Tapping the mainframe to power your portals**

Companies looking to leverage their existing systems and speed transactions, or lower total cost of ownership, should consider deploying Web portals to the mainframe. When running on System z with the z/OS operating system, the platform provides the highest qualities of service and performance and availability to significantly improve portal-related transaction performance. You can also take advantage of the proximity between System z and subsystems such as DB2, IMS and CICS, to expose related functions within portal applications. When more concerned with rapid deployment and lowering ownership costs, running on Linux and the mainframe lets you roll out new applications quickly, including those from other Linux and non-Linux server platforms. The results can mean significant savings on server, power and labor costs, and for software licenses.

While other vendors have yet to offer portal software for the mainframe, IBM plans release of WebSphere Portal V. 6.1 for z/OS in December 2008. The release builds on a heritage of WebSphere Portal products available for the platform.

## Checking under the hood

When considering adding portal software to create self-service options and other portal applications, look for features that can enhance the user experience and speed development, such as:

**Pre-built services** – Portal software should greatly reduce required developer skills. Rather than coding everything from scratch, point-and-click configuration and visual drag and drop features should help allow quick assembly of portals and portlets. Also look for out-of-the-box support for easy incorporation of data from DB2, CICS, IMS, SAP, PeopleSoft and other key applications to customize portals and simplify development.

**User-friendly interface** – The software portal interface should be graphical, engaging and intuitive to help companies exceed user expectations and provide greater user buy-in. The GUI should be fast and responsive and not make customers wait for page refreshes to get information. Also look for software that takes advantage of Web 2.0 features, such as dynamic partial screen refreshes, ability to use Web 2.0 widgets and gadgets, and integration with social software features, such as blogging, tagging and community interaction. Consider features that allow users to further customize their pages with new portlet applications, widgets or gadgets from the Web. For example, these might include location finders with maps which users can tie to delivery addresses – and other gadgets that offer dynamic Web content to improve the customer experience.

**Easily control look and feel** – Even non-technical site owners should gain the ability to build and change the look and feel of a site – navigation, buttons, colors, and other visual elements – easily with no coding or development. Updating or adding content should be achieved without navigating through complex processes or requiring IT administrator intervention.

**Tap single architecture and framework** – The ability to use the same core portal technology for all supported operating systems on the mainframe, UNIX and PC servers, can allow for easier migration of portal applications to new systems. It also helps companies preserve their existing investments.

Adding portals to create online self-service options can help companies save significantly on labor costs, while also encouraging customer satisfaction and loyalty. Using portal software to speed development and deployment of these portals and portlets on System z can help you leverage your existing computing investments to gain the performance benefits of the platform. It can also help you cut costs within a challenging business environment.

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