

Portals for the People

We've moved beyond email, beyond intranets, to the next digital force that will reshape how people work and how they relate to their companies. Oliver Muoto, cofounder of Epicentric Inc., explains the rise of B2E Web portals.

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First came email. The ability of anyone in an organization to send messages to anyone else at any time didn't just make communication faster — it changed the nature of organizational life. With more people than ever in the loop on critical decisions, people who had relevant information or powerful ideas had a better chance than ever to influence the outcome of those decisions. Hierarchies of position gave way to hierarchies of expertise.

Then came intranets. Companies are ever-changing collections of business units, R&D programs, project teams, marketing campaigns, HR initiatives — all of which, until the rise of the Web, were invisible to most of the people who worked at those companies. Creating one-click-away archives of PowerPoint presentations made by a company's sales staff, or of status reports on a company's new-product team, didn't just make sharing work easier — it made the entire company more transparent. People who had never gone on a sales call could see for themselves how the company was presenting itself to customers; people whose work was affected by a particular team could look directly at what that team was doing.

Oliver Muoto believes that we will soon experience the next great wave of digitally driven change. Leading that wave will be new services that he calls “B2E (business-to-employee) portals” — or, more simply, “people portals.” Think MyYahoo! for your company. A people portal is a customized, personalized, ever-changing mix of news, resources, applications, and e-commerce options that becomes the desktop destination for everyone in an organization — and the primary vehicle by which people do their work. “Each person's ‘start page’ reflects a unique view of the world — a set of requirements and desires, of likes and dislikes,” Muoto says. “At the same time, everyone is using the same basic services, and that improves the cohesion of the company. The user — in other words, the employee — is in charge: It's not ‘the company’; it's ‘my company.’ “

Muoto, 30, is cofounder of Epicentric Inc., a San Francisco-based outfit that is helping a growing number of high-powered clients to develop B2E portals. Its killer app is a collection of 200 “modules” that accelerate the process of designing and deploying such portals. Some of those modules are Web-soft-

ware building blocks. Others hinge on content partnerships — deals with Web companies to provide news headlines, stock quotes, or weather reports. “You have to deliver a wide range of functionality, and you have to deliver it fast,” Muoto says. “People expect more than what most intranets offer. They want more than just links. They want news. They want applications. They want commerce. And they want all of it their way.”

Muoto understands this impatient mind-set firsthand. A fast-talking, fast-walking bachelor (did we mention that he has been named one of the most eligible men in Silicon Valley?), he is the son of a Polish mother and a Nigerian father. He was educated in Nigeria before attending the University of Southern California, where he first indulged his entrepreneurial spirit by organizing a student dry-cleaning service and a marketing business that sold ads on local cable stations. As soon as he received his diploma, he headed for Silicon Valley — and life as a self-confessed “startup junkie.”

In 1997, after working at five other startups, Muoto teamed up with his friend Ed Anuff to launch Epicentric. The company, with four offices across the country, now has more than 70 clients, including Autodesk, Lockheed Martin, Motorola, and Sun Microsystems. Its chief investors include France Telecom and Reuters. In a series of interviews with Fast Company, Muoto explained the power of people portals.

What's the difference between a company intranet and a people portal?

An intranet is a collection of links to various resources — most of them internal, some of them external — that may be useful to people in a company. Let me emphasize the word “may.” Most intranets capture what leaders in the company think is important: They reflect a top-down view of what's happening in the organization. And very few intranets are designed with the user experience in mind. The attitude is “It's work, right? So why worry about making the intranet as much fun, or as colorful, or as easy to navigate, as the most popular commercial Web sites?” Let's be honest. When the Web came along, lots of companies just took their existing applications, spent a few million

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dollars to create a Web user interface, and — presto! — they had an intranet.

A B2E portal is a centralized starting point for everyone in an organization. It uses the Web to bring together a wide range of applications, services, content options, and e-commerce tools, and it allows users to personalize those offerings in ways that make sense to them. If you've got 5,000 people in your company, you might have 5,000 different "start pages," with each one based on what people need to do their work, what they need in order to track developments in the outside world, and what their outside interests happen to be. A real B2E portal has three characteristics. First, it has one point of entry — one and only one URL. Second, it gives you not just company propaganda, but everything that you want. And third, it is uniquely your own. You decide what you see and how you see it. You influence both the substance and the style of presentation.

Paint a picture for us. I work in a company with a people portal, and I arrive at the office at 8 AM. What's on my desktop?

The first thing that you see is your start page — your personal window into the company and into the world. On your start page, you see a bunch of modules: "My Company," "My Department," "My Stuff." The content of each module — information updates, links to key sites — is based on choices that you've made about what you need to do your job. Your company may support hundreds of R&D projects, but you may be personally involved in just five of them. Instead of having to navigate a generic intranet site for your R&D group, you can create links and sign up for updates that relate only to those five projects. You may be in sales and need to track what your three biggest competitors are doing. So you choose an information service and a stock-price service for just those companies. You may have a four-year-old daughter whom you worry about even more than you worry about your competitors. So you arrange for your start page to include a link to a video feed from her day-care center. People have different needs, different interests, different worries. Their start pages should reflect those differences.

But the really important thing about a B2E portal isn't what's on each person's desktop. The really important thing is what B2E portals say about the future of work — and about the way that people relate to their company and to one another.

So what's the logic behind a B2E portal?

Here's the first point: B2E portals have to be compelling to the people who use them. Every day, companies are competing for the eyeballs of their employees with eBay, Yahoo!, and thousands of other Web sites. We all know that a huge percentage

of traffic to consumer Web sites comes from people who are connecting to the Net at the office. That actually makes sense. We think about work when we're home, and we deal with our lives when we're at work. So a portal needs to address the whole person — as an employee, as a colleague, as a consumer, as a parent, as a community member.

Why pretend that people are one way at home and another way at work? Let them use a B2E portal to meet all of their needs. With many of our installations, users can choose modules that feature news headlines, sports scores, stock updates, and weather reports. We even offer a horoscope module. You have to think about your employees in the way that Yahoo! thinks about its customers. You may not be competing for their business in the way that Yahoo! is — but you are competing for their attention.

I suppose that you can try to "stop" people from checking on their eBay auctions while they're at work, and then you can put out an email memo about your latest HR applet and urge people to check that out instead. In reality, of course, it's virtually impossible to force anyone to do anything these days — especially on the Web. The way that you persuade people to spend their time on your B2E service is by creating a service that's so useful, so relevant, so compelling, that they actually want to spend time there.

That's an appealing vision, but I can already hear the objections: The inmates are running the asylum!

A B2E portal reflects a new view of the relationship between an organization and its people. You can't force people to look at your company the way that you want them to. It makes no sense to spend millions of dollars on a Web-based application, only to discover that no one uses it. At the same time, it's entirely reasonable to have certain expectations of your people. The workplace keeps getting more democratic, but people in a democracy still have certain responsibilities.

Here's a relatively minor example. Our stock-quote module allows users to choose the stocks that they want to track. But a company can also provide a list of stocks that must be on every employee's tracking list — its biggest competitors, for example, or its best customers. That's perfectly fair: Companies have a right to expect their people to be well informed about that kind of thing.

Here's a more significant example, one that comes up often. Companies care a lot about their brands. And, when it comes to branding, we know that design matters and that projecting a corporate brand within a company is no less important than projecting it through external marketing materials. So lots of companies say, "People can choose the content that they need,

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but everyone's page has to 'look and feel' like the company." That's fair too, and our tools allow companies to set parameters: "No, you can't change the color scheme. Yes, that information must be displayed in three columns."

Ultimately, the user has to win. People have to be able to get the resources that they need to do their jobs. But companies still need to control some basic issues: design, security, integrity. This isn't about anarchy; it's about shared control.

One beef about intranets is that they take so long to deploy. IT departments don't exactly work in Internet time. Don't you worry that if you conjure up a compelling vision of a B2E portal, people are going to get frustrated as they wait for it to materialize?

The biggest question that we face from our Fortune 500 clients is "How can we act more like a dotcom company? How can we become a faster company?" Our answer is that they need to embrace a B2E portal. The deployment cycle for traditional enterprise software can last 9 months. The deployment cycle for a portal can be as short as 30 days. That's why we've developed all of these modules. You can take our packaged content modules, use our existing software, and get a portal up and running very quickly.

Our recent experience with Motorola offers a great example of how that works. Greg Goluska, vice president of customer support, was the leader of a team at Motorola that was creating a B2E portal. The team's first goal was to design a service that would treat employees like customers. Its second goal was to create a site that would become a single point of entry for all Motorolans. Finally, and most important, the team wanted the process of creating the portal to reflect the kind of organization that everyone at Motorola wants the company to become.

So the design process had to be not only fast but also democratic. We holed up for three days at the Chicago Institute of Technology, with 60 Motorolans from around the world, along with engineers from Epicentric. We were there all day and most of each night. There weren't any fancy dinners; we just sent out for pizza. The group broke into small teams, and people talked about the really basic questions: What's on the minds of our customers — in this case, employees? Who's best at doing this stuff already, and what can we learn from those people? Then teams created prototypes and subjected them to review. We called this process "Building the Straw Portal Review." We debated during the day, did the builds at night, and reviewed the results the next morning. At the end of the three-day exercise, the plan was presented to Motorola's CIO. Greg said, "This isn't just trying to change the company. This is trying to change the way that we change."

And this isn't one-shot change. Once you've got a portal in place, small groups of people — teams, departments, business units — can make changes on their own. Do the people in your group want to work together more seamlessly? We have a module that enables users to create discussion groups. We also have a collaboration module that supports interactive chat.

How else do B2E portals change the way that you think about people and technology?

We're playing with lots of different ideas. For example, maybe you can change how you budget for investments in technology. Once you've got the basic portal infrastructure in place, you can have various departments "buy" advertising to "pay for" the portal. Big companies have lots of services that they provide to their employees: HR initiatives, a company store, a day-care center. A thriving B2E portal becomes a "channel" by which departments can promote those services, and the technology department can charge them for the opportunity to advertise there. Why does it always have to be a cost center? Why can't it be entrepreneurial too?

Here's another idea: As I said earlier, any CEO who is honest about it knows that people are spending some time at work buying books from Amazon.com or bidding on memorabilia on eBay. That happens everywhere. Rather than complain about people shopping from their desk, why not turn it to your advantage? We offer an e-commerce group-buying module that features a series of pre-packaged deals with online vendors. All you have to do is sign up for it, and your employees will get discounts on all sorts of stuff. That option could become a new kind of employee benefit, and it would encourage people to keep working within the framework of the portal. If people come to the portal because they want to get a great deal on a gift, and if the page containing that deal also contains a quarterly financial report that your CFO wants everyone to read, then the chance of that report actually getting read will go up dramatically.

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