

The Intranet Landing Page

A brief technology discussion

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Information overload is a fact of life today. However the problem of navigating through a vast sea of information was encountered long before we had information technology. Consider, libraries, encyclopedias, even the Yellow Pages. The solution then was to categorize and index the content. Today we have a couple of new tools, like search engines and social bookmarking, but these are still working on the same principles of categorizing and indexing content to make it possible to find things quickly.

The primary purpose of an Intranet is to help people find and share information, and the main way we can do this is using these tried and tested methods. The Intranet landing page is where it all happens.



The Landing Page is the Intranet



The landing page is going to leap out at every staff member every time they open their web browser. When staff members talk about “The Intranet” they are talking less about all those documents, applications, training materials and forms, and more about the home page.

That’s why the landing page really counts, and that’s why this document is more about the landing page than it is about the Intranet in general. You already have the documents, applications, training materials and forms – the trouble is finding and accessing them. The landing page is like Google is to the web - a veneer over the top of all this that will make or break it. The landing page is THE page that everyone comes too. It should be the most dynamic page on the whole Intranet, updated frequently with the most important information.

The IT Holy Grail



The “Enterprise Portal” has been one of most spoken buzzwords in IT in the past 10 years. Every major IT vendor has put out an Enterprise Portal product. For a list of some of the major ones, refer:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enterprise_portal

The portal is the place where the many fragments of technology in an organization are supposed to come together into a unified whole. This is the current IT holy grail – to bring fragmented technology silos together into a unified whole. It’s a worthy goal.

But while any single vendor's portal solution may achieve this vision to some extent, no one uses just one vendor's products! Nor would it be wise to. Who wants to be locked into one vendor's products, and to be limited by the limitations of those products? Freedom to mix and match IT solutions from a diverse range of vendors, including the freedom to develop custom solutions, is essential.

The picture seen in almost every organization, including Ballance, is a diversity of technologies for things like document management, accounting, payroll, issue tracking, collaboration, staff directory, news, shared calendars etc. No portal vendor has an off-the-shelf solution that will integrate all these information silos.

The point here is that your portal platform may integrate some of your information systems, but the rest are up to you. The off-the-shelf portal is therefore only a partial solution for a successful Intranet. There are a couple of different options to fix this:

- a) Develop custom "portlets" (applications that plug into the portal product) that give access into your organisation's information silos.
- b) Link from your portal homepage to your other information silos
- c) Put a layer over the top of the portal, *the landing page*, that links to all the main information silos

The approach advocated here is to build a lightweight landing page that is independent of any individual vendor's product. The landing page is a veneer over the top of everything. Below is the reasoning behind this approach:

- 1) Custom portlet development is expensive and requires scarce and expensive resources to do properly
- 2) Enterprise portal's are heavyweight web pages that are slow, and speed is important as we'll discuss below
- 3) Custom portlets are limited in terms of the functionality they can achieve - there are strict boundaries and standards that must be adhered to in order to make a portlet 'compliant' with a vendor's portal product.
- 4) The landing page approach removes all these constraints and makes it possible to design an Intranet solution to meet your needs, regardless of the constraints of your portal product.

Why Technology Doesn't Matter



In designing a landing page, technology should barely enter into the conversation.

Technology wise, a landing page is simple. There are multitudes of high quality, low cost web technologies (Java, PHP, ColdFusion, .NET, Ruby) that are more than capable of delivering your landing page. The technology decisions you make should be based around the cost of software and the availability of suitably qualified people to implement and support the technology long term.

If you find you are talking about Enterprise Portals, ERP systems, portlet specifications like JSR-168 and JSR-286, web servers, content management systems, frameworks, integration, or migration, then you are having the wrong conversation. Don't get me wrong, you can and will have many of these things, it's just that the veneer you put over these things - your landing page - isn't concerned with these details, and that is one of its strengths.

Why Performance Does Matter



When TradeMe started looking closely at the performance of their web site they found something interesting. As they made their pages load faster, people bought more stuff. When you think about it, it makes sense - the faster the pages load, the more items the shopper sees, and the higher the chances they find what they want.

Google understands this too – they made their search engine faster than their competitors, and this is one of the reasons for their success.

The landing page is going to get more ‘hits’ than any other page on the Intranet. If the landing page is slow it becomes a bottleneck, an obstacle in the way of getting to information. You will find users will actively seek ways to avoid the landing page if they see it as slow. This is another reason not to use an Enterprise Portal as an Intranet landing page – Enterprise Portals have very heavyweight web pages which are not exactly known for their speed.

The Branch Office Experience



We’ve discussed why performance matters. When we consider the experience of the branch office or remote user, we find that performance is an even bigger issue than it is for the head office user. Consider the hoops the remote user has to jump through to access the Intranet:

- Connect VPN and log in
- Connect Citrix
- Open browser, which opens the landing page
- Navigate to content/application etc.

This process is going to be measured in minutes.

Even in the case of the always-connected branch office user, the branch office user will never experience anything like the performance of the head office user who has a high speed local area network connection to the Intranet.

Citrix and VPN technologies extend the Intranet to everywhere that has Internet access, but they only come in two speeds: slow and very slow.

Clearly anything that can be done to improve the lot of the remote user and branch office user is going to improve the level of utility and satisfaction and utility they gain from the Intranet.

Again we find the landing page needs to be fast. But even with a fast landing page, the ‘cost’ of getting to information is very high due to all the other steps involved, and the slowness of the VPN/Citrix connection.

One way around this is to have a special landing page for remote users that is accessible without a Citrix/VPN login.

Keep it Simple, Stupid



Keeping the landing page simple is essential to its success. It’s not because users lack screen size that we have to keep it lean and mean. The problem is that people have a limited attention span and clutter hides the important stuff. Lean also means fast, and as we’ve discussed, performance really matters.

Search



The landing page can provide access to your existing Enterprise Search technology. However, Enterprise Search, suffers the same weaknesses as the Enterprise Portal – it doesn’t cover all your existing information silos and legacy systems. The landing page can add value by aggregating multiple search “feeds”, allowing users to search disconnected information silos which are not covered by Enterprise Search – this might include the staff directory, various document repositories and other information otherwise invisible to Enterprise Search.

Future Proofing



The way to future proof technology investments is not to try to predict the future, but to use technology that is able to adapt and change over time. A landing page over which you retain total control is one way to help achieve this. Should mobile phone based access to Intranet resources become a priority, you can build a mobile version of the landing page that is optimised for the mobile experience.