

# The Web Portal...

... should every business have one?

By Gary Lowrey, NetSolCQ Commercial Director

**LeaseSoft**<sup>®</sup>  
Seamless Efficiency

For any business the ability to provide, access and exchange information with business partners when needed, is vital to the success of that partnership. This is true for all industries and a plethora of terminology has emerged to describe how this information can be accessed electronically, for example extranets, intranets and web portals. The key however is to recognise that the underlying requirement is to provide a capability to electronically access and update information, which until recently, has been stored and locked away, and to do this is a simple, user-friendly way regardless of where the user is accessing the information from.

Introducing business portals. It could be argued that no business should be without one but how true is this? What does it mean for the finance industry and in particular those in the leasing business?

## Development of the Web Portal

Since the inception of the Internet, information available over the 'net' has grown exponentially. A simple Internet search on 'business portal' returned 236 million entries in 0.13 seconds. Outstanding considering what might have been returned 10 years ago! In a business context however, most prefer a secure, integrated and personalised single web user interface which gives access specifically to information and applications users need to do their job efficiently and effectively. The real value-add comes from being able to extend these principles beyond an individual company to the wider business community in which a business participates. The opportunity to collaborate with others

through that same web interface, share common information and to seamlessly execute business over the 'net' delivers a competitive advantage compared to the older working practises.

The emergence of business portal technologies now allows the personalisation of information, often referred to as 'content', to suit the needs of any user whether they are an internal employee, a business partner or a customer.

But what is a Portal? Webster's Dictionary defines a 'Portal' as 'a doorway, gate, or entrance'. Put this into a computing context and it is a much more than web-based user interface. Some of the key attributes you might expect to find in a 'Portal' include:

- Ability to personalise the data viewed by the user and its presentation style
- 'Self Service' capability to update key data and report
- Publishing and categorisation services
- Directory management
- An integral search engine
- Subscription, delivery, and notification capabilities
- Workflow management
- Collaboration facilities for sharing data, processes and actions
- A single point security control, role and responsibility management
- A development framework for customising data and its presentation

The demand for portal technology was initially driven by consumers trying to find information on the Internet - the Internet Portal. By using a profile of a user's information requirements

# The Web Portal

**LeaseSoft**<sup>®</sup>  
Seamless Efficiency

and the services of a search engine, users could quickly find information matching their needs. The portal technology would provide the consumer with a single interface to the vast network of servers that constitute the Internet.

Today these portals also support personalisation of content and services as well as user customisation of screen layout. Typically the scope of information supported by Internet portals is limited to web documents and live feeds.

In parallel, companies began to create what became known as 'Intranets', which allows employees and sometimes customers, access to key company data. This data, more often than not, was unstructured and not dynamically updated. They differ from Internet portals in that they support a wider range of information, and also provide a rich set of content management and collaborative services. Content management services include text mining and clustering of related unstructured information, information categorisation in order to classify it and make it easy to find, summarisation to generate abstracts for documents, publishing and subscription services, finding people, and tracking expertise. In some cases the Intranet Portal and services have grown into a more dynamic environment providing collaborative services that allow users to chat, organise meetings, share calendaring information, define user communities, participate in net meetings, and share information in either discussion groups or by means of white boards.

To date this style of 'collaborative' portal has been primarily used within the business as a corporate facility, however business-to-business use is increasing and could become a key component of the Business Partner Portal.

While much of the Intranet portal developments have focused on drawing together unstructured data, businesses have in parallel sought to collate, group and categorise structured information from their operational systems. Sometimes referred to as Business Intelligence (BI) Portals, they were designed to provide executives, managers, and business analysts with easy access to the underlying operational data in a meaningful way to support key business decisions. Typically this involves indexing BI reports, analysis and predefined queries usually associated with financial and customer data. Today BI portals are driven by BI tools (that facilitate reporting, OLAP and data mining) and are packaged with analytic applications and support for dynamic alerts. More often than not the BI Portals run against the Data Warehouse that is an extraction of data from the operational systems thereby protecting the integrity and performance of those systems from intensive user interrogation.

## Business Partner Portals

Increasingly, businesses are looking at the complete picture and this has created a demand for the integration of both structured and unstructured data and hence the emergence of the 'corporate portal' where both access to key operational data and unstructured company information can be accessed through a single portal offering. The 'corporate portal' has, until recently, been an internal domain for the business but this is beginning to change, as companies seek to provide more information to their business partners.

Thus we see a picture emerging where the 'business partner portal' not only provides access to each partner's data, but the concept of initiating a transaction from the partner now flows through the portal into the company's operational systems.

# The Web Portal

**LeaseSoft**<sup>®</sup>  
Seamless Efficiency

For example, within the financial services industry which is familiar to Software supplier - NetSolCQ, the common theme across all markets whether corporate finance, retail banking, commercial insurance or leasing is to establish not only access to information but the capability to augment and update it, to be able to share that information and have it presented through different profiles for the benefit of those who need to see it.

Within the world of Asset Finance and Instalment Credit, NetSolCQ has traditionally been a supplier of contract management systems and would be considered to be a 'back office' vendor. More recently however industry demands and awareness of the new market opportunities for an integrated end-to end solution has led to the development of a business partner portal. In practise adding what could be described as a 'front-end' or 'front office' to core management systems, or a Business Partner Portal.

While the requirements for market sectors are different as are the way they want to present their brand or services, all asset finance and instalment credit lenders have common themes. All lenders have multiple business partners: for example, Motor Finance partners include - dealers, insurance carriers, maintenance providers and auction houses, whereas within Equipment Finance, they typically include vendors, brokers, collection agencies and so on.

Blending individual business's requirements for a Business Partner Portal with what is a common technology infrastructure, has led to the development of a generic Business Partner Portal framework.

The basic framework has been designed specifically for lenders who wish to offer some form of 'self-service' web application to their different types of business partners.

By combining the 'self service' capability with a secure, robust and scalable technology it creates the opportunity to develop reusable application modules upon which the specific visible user functionality can be built.

The framework therefore provides a rapid application development platform for lenders to develop a variety of web applications for their Business Partner audiences where Multiple Business Partner types (e.g. Broker, Dealer, Vendor, Sales Executive, Collections Agency etc.) can be defined with alternative menu options for each.

Technology frequently advances faster than it can be implemented or indeed it might be wise to do so, but the emergence of the business partner portal is a true innovation. It will ultimately drive significant costs out of today's business processes and create a commercial framework that will enable business partners automatically transact direct with each other.

Not every business will establish a portal and not every business should. But those that recognise the opportunity to streamline their business processes, to automate workflows where practical and to work with their suppliers will see significant benefits. Conversely those lenders that provide these facilities can expect to attract valuable business partners and to improve the quality of business they transact.

**For more information please contact  
NetSolCQ on Tel. +44 (0) 1403 282300,  
email: [marketing@netsolcq.com](mailto:marketing@netsolcq.com) or  
visit our website [www.netsolcq.com](http://www.netsolcq.com)**