

# Human Resource **Executive**<sup>®</sup>



## Power Portals

The basic job of a portal is to take existing information and functionality and create from it a Web-based one-stop shop. But some companies are taking this even further.

BY GRAE YOHE

**A**s your organization reaping maximum benefits from its corporate portal? Judging by recent findings, there's a good chance it may not be.

A survey of large employers with an average of 60,000 employees by Miami-based consulting firm Answerthink found that 54 percent of the companies have implemented portals. However, the survey also revealed that most of those organizations haven't gone beyond the basics yet. For example, only eight percent indicate their portals support collaboration, 76 percent haven't integrated workflow or business-process management tools and 77 percent don't have a single-search capability extending across their portal or intranet environment.

Beth Hayes, director of IT strategies at Answerthink and one

of the study's authors, says few companies that have implemented portals are realizing their potential returns, either in hard dollars or productivity gains.

"Where companies hit the brick wall is when they roll out this technology and then wonder why there's no business benefit," she says.

Hayes's recommendations are the same you'd hear about any initiative: Have a plan. Specifically, a portal is not going to have a return if it doesn't unburden other parts of the organization. So, she says, figure out ahead of time what the portal is intended to do. Should it free up HR, making the expansion of support staff unnecessary as the company grows? Is the goal the scaling-down of a call center or the elimination of an interactive-voice response system?

"One of the things that we were most surprised at in our study was

the lack of workflow integration and business process management in the portal," Hayes says. Basically, the punchline is that a portal should no longer be where employees go to *find* things. The best portal strategy, says Hayes, will allow them to *do* things.

### 'E-enabled' Employees

A successful portal, experts say, eliminates redundancy and streamlines processes throughout the organization.

"The main benefit the portal brings," says David Ludlow, vice president of HCM at Newtown Square, Pa.-based SAP, "is not just the delivery, but the aggregation of everything so that now, I don't have to go to ten different places. I just go to one."

This may sound trivial, but it's not. Just because the company has a Web site doesn't mean people are using it instead of calling managers

or HR with questions. Just because most enterprise applications—like HR management and benefits administration—are now Web-enabled doesn't mean employees know what system to log onto, how to do it, or what to do once they get there. A well-designed portal, on the other hand, is a simple-to-navigate, one-stop shop embedded with only the most common application functions. Specific content is filtered for the individual user, showing only what is appropriate to that person's role in the company. More self-service means less call center volume, less need for support staff, less time wasted enrolling in benefits and more time spent doing real work.

"As opposed to putting out message-level content and information, these portals really need to be designed based on the work processes that employees and managers go through every day—to 'e-enable' them, if you will," says Mimi Brooks, CEO of Morristown, N.J.-based technology consultancy Logical Design Solutions Inc.

As an example of e-enabling, consider O'Charley's Inc., a restaurant chain based in Nashville, Tenn. Chief Support Officer Susan Osterberg says while the company is just beginning to implement its portal from San Francisco-based Plumtree Software, a significant amount of previously by-hand work has already been moved online.

"We put a lot of our reporting information out there. For our supervisors to get current, up-to-date information on the sales in their restaurant, their labor report, their shoppers report—we've put that in the portal and have eliminated as much paper as we can." She adds that promotions, raises, vacations, etc. are still manual processes in which supervisors must call the home office. Very soon, however, all of this will be done through the portal.

"The support staff gets out of a lot of manual task work," she says, "and they can focus on, 'What's that next thing we should be thinking about?'"

## The ROI Factor

Although portals can, in fact, free HR staff to focus on tasks they otherwise wouldn't have time for, a squishy metric like "increased productivity" might be a hard sell to the CEO or CFO, especially in today's economy. There needs to be real ROI, and it needs to happen fairly quickly. For their part, Plumtree offers an ROI workbook designed to quantify less-tangible benefits. For example, Plumtree predicts a 75 percent reduction in the transfer of large files via e-mail because the portal provides a central file repository. Multiply network storage and traffic reductions by storage and traffic costs to find savings. Similarly, the ROI workbook predicts significant decreases in paper costs (one client reports using 20,000 fewer pieces of paper per month), printing, mailing and so forth.

Training costs are also reduced, according to Leslie Lin, Plumtree's solutions marketing manager. "It takes a lot of time for users to get trained on [an HRMS]. When a certain piece of it is embedded in the portal as what we call a 'portlet'—what we consider to be the five percent of the application the people use 95 percent of the time—there's a lot less to learn."

One portlet Cincinnati-based Cinergy uses in its Plumtree portal is their HRMS's "view my paycheck" function. Users need know nothing about the HRMS to use it because they effectively see only the portal's navigation. Users can view organizational charts and directories. Managers use the portal to transfer employees and give raises. All of these functions come together in one place, under one log-in, with the user none the wiser that she is moving between different systems.

The portal wasn't always this way, says Manager of Compensation and HR Technology Strategy Mike Kehling.

"Our corporate communications group went out to work sites, power plants and the corporate offices, and talked to employees to find out what they wanted and what made sense to them," he

says. What came from these initial surveys was a fairly static set of pages Kehling describes as informational, like a vast knowledgebase.

"Then, nine months to a year later, they did a follow-up visit to find out what was working for employees and what wasn't," he continues. What Cinergy found during those follow-ups was exactly what Answerthink's Hayes and LDS's Brooks warn of: The site was too static, with not enough process integration. On the overhaul, Cinergy plugged applications into the portal and turned it into a place where employees could complete processes they had previously done over the phone or on paper.

"A big part of the strategy was to trying to get people to do as much online as possible, and then if that failed and you couldn't find what you needed, then you would call the service center," he says.

This is really the whole point, says Ed Colby, director of customer programs at portal vendor Workscape Inc. in Framingham, Mass. If a portal is going to pull its weight, people need to not only go there and use it, but to use it *instead* of using more traditional avenues. To this end, Colby says: Measure your progress.

"You've got to see a reduction in calls going to the call centers," he says. "You've got to see reductions in paper activity."

Adds LDS's Brooks, counting individual log-ins isn't enough. After initial planning in which progress metrics are determined, LDS advocates regular follow-ups. In these follow-up measurements, she says, hits and page views mean little.

"In an HR portal, it's not terribly meaningful to say we did 6,000 sessions last month," she says. "The more interesting questions would be: How many of those transactions didn't repeat over to the call center? How many of those sessions really resulted in a completed process, as opposed to someone came in and did a lookup and left?"

General Motors, which has its headquarters in Detroit, imple-

# Portals: A Quick-Start Guide

**P**lumtree Software and Workscape claim the typical time-to-ROI for their portal clients is about a year and a half, but it doesn't matter how much money a portal will save in the long run if cost is prohibitive now. Here's how to start small for quick returns, with an eye to expansion later on.

## Hit the pain points first

"The processes that have the most value to the business should be the processes that are engineered first," says Mimi Brooks, CEO of consultancy Logical Design Solutions. Specifically, companies looking for a quick payback should first automate high-volume transactions such as benefits enrollment and paystub viewing. Because putting these processes online should take a load off call centers, eliminate paper and free up staff for more productive tasks, returns are usually fast. Then, after the portal has a foothold, the company can turn to slower-returning but cumbersome processes like compensation planning.

## Re-use existing content

General Motors, says Executive Director of Employee Benefits and Human Resource Operations Jean Rose, already had a substantial investment in the Socrates site which became the mySocrates portal. So when the company built the portal, the designers linked to a lot of existing content instead of creating it anew, saving substantial costs.

"If we already had it built, we did not rebuild it," says Rose. "GM really leveraged our existing site."

## Go ASP

If the budget is particularly tight, says Ed Colby, Workscape's director of customer programs, consider having the portal hosted externally. As with any application service provider plan, hardware and software reside with the provider, reducing up-front costs to virtually nothing. Implementation is faster as well, Colby adds, with most systems up and running in 12 to 16 weeks instead of months. In the Workscape model, the ASP portal has all of the features of the in-house version.

mented a Workscape portal to aggregate pre-existing sites under a single log-in, in a navigation-friendly interface. Little of the actual content was re-invented, says Executive Director of Employee Benefits and Human Resources Operations Jean Rose, but the portal has moved significant numbers of processes off the backs of support staff.

"Over a three-week period, we had 95,000 calculations completed online for a program we had last year," she says. "We would have really had a hard time if we had our pension administration center handling all those phone calls."

When implementing a portal for quick ROI, consultants suggest first going after time-intensive "pain points" such as GM's pension calculations.

"Things like benefits enrollment," says Workscape's Colby. "Things like compensation planning. Things like distribution of employee pay stubs — those really labor-intensive, costly human resource applications which touch every employee."

Of course, ala Answerthink's Hayes, it's not enough to build the portal and hope people will know to use it. At Cinergy, several e-newsletters continually point to what's on the portal and why employees should go there. GM provides an incentive to its employees; a partnership with America Online allows GM employees to get subsidized AOL subscriptions so they can access the portal from home. And if all else fails, companies can do what O'Charley's does with some of its most important reports, putting them on the portal but nowhere else.

"We thought that if there were certain things [managers] had to have every day, then we needed to put them in the portal and take them away from other sources," Osterberg explains.

Still, the big question remains: Are portals truly necessary? Predictably, vendors say yes, that future rollout costs are substantially higher for independent applications than for apps integrated into the portal framework. A more frank assessment comes from Cinergy's Kehling, who notes

that organizations with a lot of paper-based, manual processes might save money with a portal—but that organizations with a solid, useful intranet might find a portal lower on the priority list. This, says Kehling, has everything to do with hard versus soft returns.

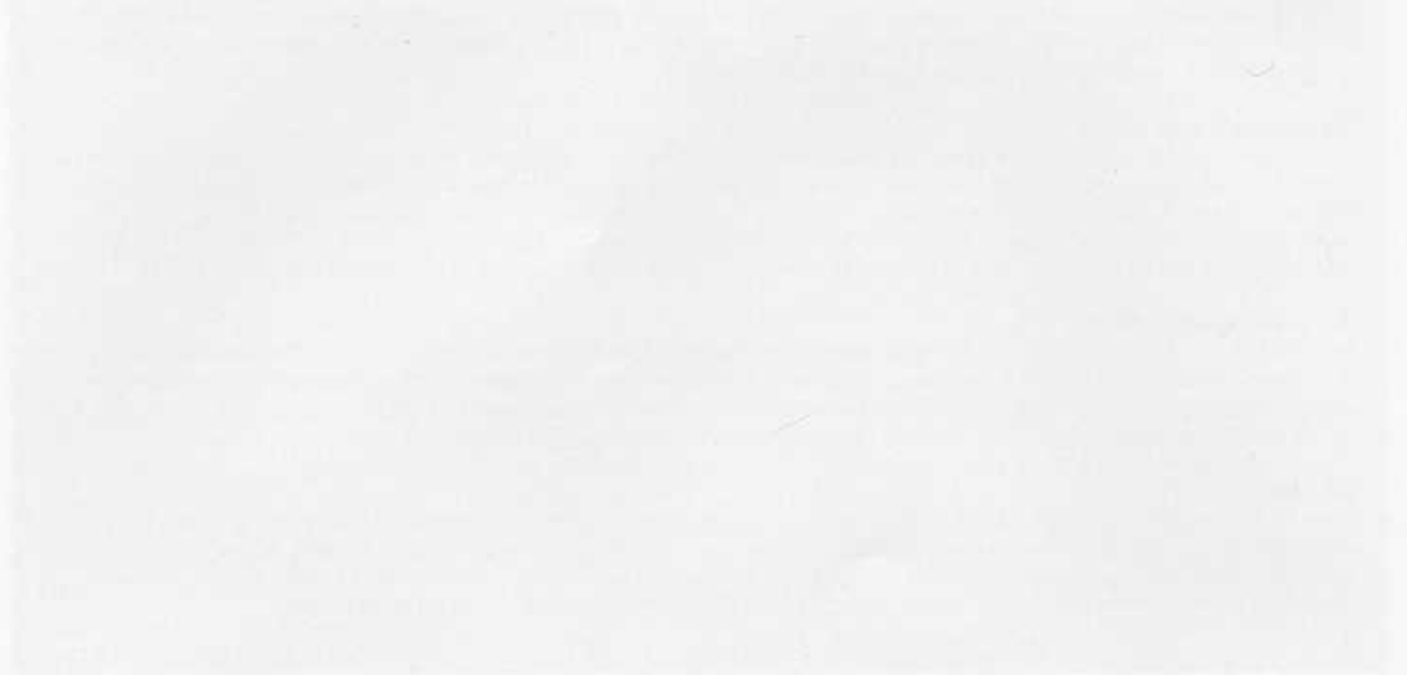
Cinergy's old Web sites would not have been as well-integrated as is the portal, he says, but integration and ease of use do not directly show in the bottom line, and he's hard-pressed to quote definitive dollar returns at this point.

O'Charley's Osterberg agrees to similar difficulties in pinning down tangible ROI but feels that their portal is vital—in terms of softer, more strategic benefits—unless the company expects to stagnate.

"For a growth company with the transactions we can automate, the communication we can strengthen, the timeliness of the information being given to our people—I think it's absolutely essential," she says.

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# How to Hire the Best



The process of hiring the best is a complex one. It involves a series of steps that are often overlooked. The first step is to define the job. This is not just about the tasks to be performed, but also about the skills and personality traits required. Once the job is defined, the next step is to attract a pool of candidates. This can be done through various channels, including job boards, social media, and referrals. The third step is to screen the candidates. This involves reviewing resumes and conducting initial interviews. The final step is to select the best candidate. This is often the most difficult step, as it requires a careful comparison of all the candidates against the job requirements.

Another key aspect of hiring is the interview process. A well-structured interview can help to identify the best candidate. This involves asking a series of questions that are designed to assess the candidate's skills and personality. The questions should be tailored to the job requirements. For example, if the job requires a high level of creativity, then the interview questions should focus on the candidate's creative abilities. The interview process should also be a two-way street, allowing the candidate to ask questions and learn more about the organization.

Once the best candidate has been selected, the next step is to make an offer. This involves presenting the candidate with a job offer that includes details about the salary, benefits, and other terms of employment. The offer should be presented in a clear and concise manner, and the candidate should be given time to consider the offer. Once the candidate has accepted the offer, the final step is to complete the hiring process. This involves completing all the necessary paperwork and onboarding the new hire.