

Government Portals – The Next Generation of Government Online

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Portal /pawtl/ n – 1. a (grand or imposing) door or entrance

The eEconomy has introduced a raft of new terminology into our daily lexicon, spawning a new language for business and consumers alike. On occasion it has harnessed obscure words that have fallen from common usage to describe new channels for the flow of information and transactions.

Portal is one of these words, and their growth is redefining the way citizens and businesses interact with each other. They are the next generation of online interaction, and are transforming the way in which business is conducted online. For governments, their potential to redesign interactions with citizens and businesses is no less powerful than in the private sector, and governments all around the world are starting to harness that power. However, in common with all eGovernment efforts, portal development has its challenges and pitfalls. This article outlines the challenges faced by governments in this next phase of the transition to eGovernment.

A 24x7 World

Citizens' experience with the 24x7 world of the private sector has fuelled demands for similar experience with their governments; easy to deal with, available when you want them to be, one-stop service that is personalised, and simple completion of transactions on line. This utopia bears little resemblance to government's current capabilities; multiple agencies, multiple payment and delivery options, little coordination or standards, modest online functionality and variable customer service capabilities.

Citizen demands are at odds with the current structure of most government

agencies. Evidence is emerging however that when government does go online successfully, patterns of interaction are dramatically changed.

This is, so far, the exception rather than the rule. Most governments have responded to the eEconomy in an agency centred way, with the outcome being a proliferation of websites – the majority of which have little impact on the quality of service and offer limited functionality to the citizen.

Governments have generally focused on what agencies intend to deliver rather than what citizens intend to achieve, and they have seldom presented a dynamic and user-friendly face to the world over the Internet.

Implementing eGovernment is however considerably more complex than a corporate introducing online sales or moving procurement to a trade exchange. Calls for government service delivery to migrate from in-line to online sooner rather than later often overlook the complex social, regulatory, and legal issues governments face in changing their service delivery models.

In the first generation of online presence, the implementation hurdles of making eGovernment programs come alive, many of which stem from the complex nature of government organisation models, have been immense. But with new developments in Internet technology, specifically portals, these hurdles become far less of a barrier than previously. eGovernment becomes a possibility, and while demanding strong levels of inter-agency co-operation, it does not require the wholesale dismantling of existing government departments in order to create a new interface to the citizens and businesses government serves.

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The Promise of eGovernment – The Virtual Agency

eGovernment brings benefits to both citizens and governments, through creating a gateway to government that is more open, making communication between individuals and government far easier. Essentially, eGovernment provides a web that is well equipped to connect fragmented entities. The potential now exists to create a single service delivery mechanism – providing a framework by which several different agencies and service providers can vastly improve customer service levels, by creating the virtual agency which delivers several different services via a portal.

The virtual agency delivers services clustered by needs, not by agency. For example, Figure 1 shows all the government services a citizen consumes in relation to ownership of a motor vehicle. These services are provided by up to 10 different agencies, and, under the agency silo model typical of today's governments, the citizen would be required to interact with each agency in turn, often providing the same basic information.

In the private sector, companies that replicated their offline structures online soon came unstuck, finding that consumers behave differently online. Consumers seek out and are loyal to the businesses that organise around their needs, not the needs of the provider. Businesses organised around the consumer's intentions also operate at lower cost, eliminating duplicate data

collection, enjoy lower cost of sales from returning customers, and higher profits.

While government is not necessarily in the business of building loyalty given the lack, for most services, of competing providers, the prospect of providing better service at lower cost must certainly appeal. As the gateway to the services of a number of agencies, the portal provides the entry point to the virtual agency to guide users to the services they need and provide the agency with the transaction it requires.

Portals – The Next Generation

We are moving to the next generation of government web presence; the portal. Figure 2 compares the features of websites and portals and paints a very clear picture of the richness and potential of a portal vs. a simple website. The Portal demands inter-agency co-operation and co-ordinated service delivery but this can be achieved without large scale departmental re-organisation or mergers. The Virtual Agency is linked to the physical agency in a way that it is invisible to and effortless for the user.

This is illustrated in Figure 3, which shows how the real world agencies connect to their users via a portal. The intentions-based design enables the user to access the agencies via the section of the portal matching his or her intentions at that particular time.

WEBSITE vs PORTAL

Website	Portal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic homepage List of agencies Mainly static information Some transactions Organized by agency Often stand-alone to IT Weak customer support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homepage organized by customer groups/interest List key services Information and Interactions Transaction rich Organized by user needs Fully integrated to IT systems Full customer support

Figure 2

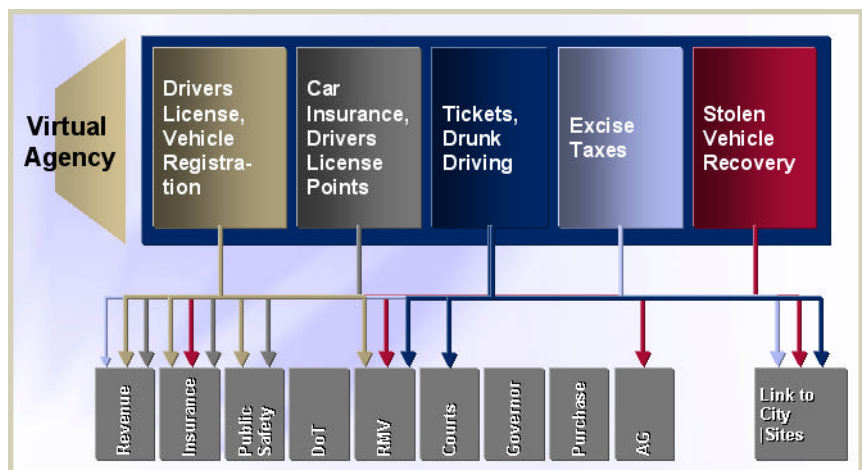


Figure 1

Insights

Intentions-based design starts, of necessity, with a clear customer segmentation strategy that identifies their needs. Designing a portal from this perspective requires working through six key steps:

- Identifying and prioritising customer segments
- Identifying needs of customer groups
- Mapping needs to information and services
- Organising the site by needs, not by agency
- Coordinating cross agency information needs
- Creating interfaces to agencies

Completing these basic steps will ensure that the design is truly based around the intentions of the user and not the structure or needs of the agency, as has too often been the case with first generation web presence.

A portal that utilises intentions-based design helps governments meet the challenges of new economy. Figure 4 outlines some of the benefits to government of taking this approach.

delivers state government services from numerous agencies via one entry point. These are just two examples of many where the virtual agency model is being successfully implemented.

These agencies have broken through the wall by paying attention to the five C's of effective eGovernment strategy:

- Customer focused – Intentions based design
- Content rich – relevant content for different user groups
- Community building – message boards, calendars, chat groups
- Connected to the back end – integration with back end legacy systems
- Change oriented – business processes are redesigned, people retrained and redeployed

These 5 rules are all critical for success; paying lip service to any one of these will derail the success of a portal strategy.

PORTAL CHARACTERISTICS

DOES	DOES NOT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Make it easier to connect with customers ■ Focus on customer needs ■ Foster cross agency co-operation ■ Allow for segmentation of customers ■ Encourage large degree of self help ■ Present a dynamic face to the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Alienate users through complexity and poor layout ■ Focus on existing agencies ■ Exacerbate departmental silos ■ Treat everyone the same ■ Encourage repetitive "form filling" ■ Increase unnecessary bureaucracy ■ Present olde world image

Figure 4

Getting eGovernment Right – The 5Cs

There are many examples around the globe of cross agency co-operation creating true intention based portals for citizens and businesses. www.centrelink.gov.au is breakthrough example of three tiers of government and 16 agencies working together. www.nc@yourservice.com

Getting Started – Making the Business Case

Many eGovernment visions have stalled due to the enormity of the task at hand. The obligation to maintain service delivery standards during a transformational initiative has been proven to be a significant barrier for many agencies in their eGovernment programs. Proving a business case to initiate the change has also been a challenge and many laudable programs fail to pass this most basic of hurdles.

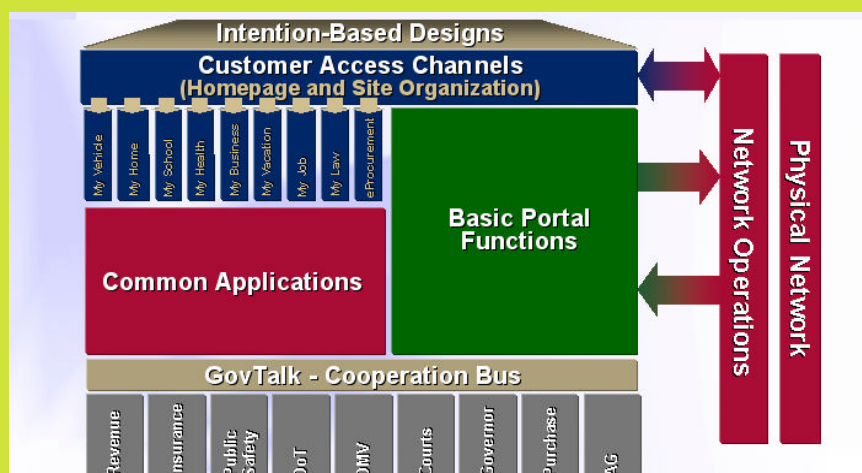


Figure 3

Insights

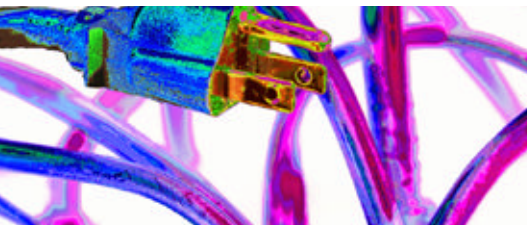
Portal has emerged from being an out of use word in our dictionary, to the next generation of online service delivery

Portals can bring a host of both indicative and dedicated benefits to the customer base they serve. For example, indicative benefits can include better customer service, increase customer satisfaction, better compliance with regulations, and shorter lines at government offices. Dedicated benefits which are important to any business case include reduced prices from suppliers, lower processing costs, quicker collection of license fees and fines and reduced tendering costs.

If governments take a holistic approach to implementing eGovernment then a situation can develop whereby revenue accrued from programmes with the most compelling business cases (such as eProcurement, eTendering and ePayment applications) can be used to cross subsidise programmes which expect little or no financial return – such as improving access

to the Internet to disadvantaged groups within society.

The new economy presents challenges for governments, and governments can meet these challenges by harnessing portal technology and concentrating on what their customers want to achieve, rather than what agencies intend to deliver. An intentions based portal makes it easier for governments, citizens and businesses to connect, and can provide social as well as financial benefits. Experience has already shown that portals can transform the government to citizen and government to business interface, without having to dismantle the traditional delivery mechanism of government agencies. Portal has emerged from being an out of use word in our dictionary, to the next generation of online service delivery.



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Vivienne Jupp has global responsibility for Accenture's eGovernment business. Vivienne has over 25 years professional consulting experience. During her career with Accenture Vivienne has led a succession of major projects which have harnessed technology to effect business change. Between May 1997 and December 2000, Vivienne chaired Ireland's Information Society Commission – reporting to the Taoiseach (the Irish Prime Minister).